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ANCESTORS

in Borneo Societies

Death, Transformation, and Social Immortality

Edited by
Pascal Couderc and Kenneth Sillander



Ancestors in Borneo Societies

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Introduction

Pascal Couderc and Kenneth Sillander

THIS BOOK EXPLORES THE RELIGIOUS and social significance of ancestors in Borneo. It presents a collection of essays written by anthropologists who have conducted ethnographic research in different Dayak (indigenous non-Malay) societies in the Indonesian or Malaysian parts of the island. Focusing on different – modern and traditional – manifestations and contexts in which ancestors appear, the essays document the nature of ancestors and relations with them in Borneo and provide answers to questions such as: How are they perceived and referred to? When and why are they invoked? How do factors like death, ritual, kinship, and social merit affect ancestral status and the process whereby ancestors come into being? What do the relations with ancestors tell about Borneo societies – what cognitive conundrums, existential exigencies, and political problems do they respond to?

Death has long held a privileged position in the ethnographic literature on Borneo, as well as in the cultural imagination of the island's inhabitants. Somewhat like Madagascar – an island whose cultural similarity, insularity, and common ethno-linguistic origins with Borneo invite comparison – Borneo is famous for its complex mortuary rituals and eschatological beliefs. Bornean deathways already attracted great interest among nineteenth century travelers and missionaries – with the result that more than one hundred accounts of the Ngaju *tiwah* alone had been published before the end of the nineteenth century (Miles 1965). Since the appearance of Claudia and Rodney Needham's English translation of Robert Hertz's classic essay on the collective representation of death (1960), Borneo has enjoyed a reputation in anthropology as a center of distribution of secondary mortuary rituals,

involving post-funeral exhumation of the dead's bones and their placement in decorated ironwood monuments raised on tall posts.

In the past half-century, numerous studies, including many seminal contributions to the Borneo ethnography, have featured eschatological beliefs or mortuary practices as principal topics (Hudson 1966, Huntington and Metcalf 1979, Metcalf 1982, Miles 1964, 1965, Needham 1965, Schärer 1963, Schiller 1997, Stöhr 1959, Uchibori 1978, Wilder 2003). Yet, despite this state of affairs, ancestorship has been a neglected field in Borneo studies. Consistent with the focus of the widely adopted Hertzian theory of death, Borneo ethnographers' interest in the dead has usually been restricted to mortuary rites, and the latter's primary manifest function of separating the living from the dead, while there are only scattered references to the dead in a benevolent or authoritative capacity as ancestors. In addition to this, overly theistic interpretations of Dayak religion have sometimes obscured the importance of ancestors, and the conversion to and influence of world religions, and reformist or rationalized indigenous counterparts (Hindu Kaharingan, Bungan), have often had the effect of downplaying the significance of ancestors in local people's representations of their religion.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and in the Pacific, the ethnographic literature testifies to a widespread cultural significance of ancestors as founders of social groups and sources of a life-generating potency, but few comparative or topically specialized publications summarizing the findings exist. For Southeast Asia, there are no classic works, and only two recent edited volumes devoted to ancestorship and related institutions: Henri Chambert-Loir's and Anthony Reid's *The Potent Dead* (2002a) on ancestors, saints, and heroes in Indonesia, and Nicola Tannenbaum's and Cornelia Kammerer's *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia* (2003a) which analyzes the politico-religious roles of settlement founders and territorial spirit owners.

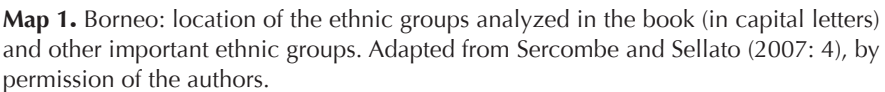
Bringing together for the first time a collection of detailed studies of ancestors in Borneo societies, this book attempts to fill these lacunae and offer ethnographic material that enables a comparison with ancestorship in other parts of the world. An important objective of the book is to describe the distinguishing characteristics of ancestorship in Borneo, and the processes whereby it becomes established and reproduced. What is and how does one become an ancestor in Borneo – and how is this different from elsewhere? An issue of special consideration in this connection is the relative importance of mortuary ceremonies *versus* other rituals and extra-ritual practices for the expression and constitution of ancestorship. By

addressing this issue, the book serves to complement the rich pre-existing literature on mortuary rituals and eschatology in Borneo, and to reinterpret the significance of the Hertzian heritage.

Formerly colonized by the Dutch and the British, Borneo is divided into the two northerly Malaysian provinces of Sarawak and Sabah – with the autonomous sultanate of Brunei wedged in between – and the Indonesian provinces of West, East, South, and Central Kalimantan, which make up the southern two-thirds of the island. The post-independence ethnography of this immense, until recently thinly populated and densely forested island – the third largest in the world – exhibits a strong northerly and Malaysian bias. This volume forms an exception to this pattern by providing an even balance between societies representing Indonesian and Malaysian Borneo (see map 1 for their geographical distribution).

The different chapters in the book represent case studies of ancestors in different Borneo societies. The contributors concentrate on how relations with ancestor spirits and important people of the past are expressed in different ritual and extra-ritual contexts that have been particularly salient in their field experience. All authors also provide some general information on the principal roles and manifestations of ancestors in the societies examined, albeit to a somewhat variable degree. Chapters 1–3 represent relatively generalized accounts of ancestorship, while the remaining five chapters chiefly focus on some specific field of ancestorship.

In Chapter 1, Kenneth Sillander presents a broad analysis of ancestors as sources of potency and authority in ritual and discourse among the Bentian of East Kalimantan. In Chapter 2, Clifford Sather systematically describes the complex processes of transformation undergone by different components of the self in Saribas Iban mortuary rituals in Sarawak and the different forms of ancestorship that they give rise to. In Chapter 3, devoted to the Uut Danum of West Kalimantan, Pascal Couderc contrasts a form of ancestorship that is created in mortuary rituals and symbolized by bone repositories with another that emerges outside ritual, through the transformation of living people into spirit-animals. In Chapter 4, Ann Appleton explores the sociological importance of the ancestor concept (*tipou*) of the Melanau of Sarawak, and the significance of experience-based knowledge of ancestors and tactile encounters with them in daily life. Appleton's contribution is followed by Véronique Béguet's, which through case studies of deceased people turned into animal spirit helpers illustrates the significance of metamorphosis as a means of establishing ancestorship among the Layar



river Iban, neighbors of the Saribas Iban analyzed by Sather. In Chapter 6, Christian Oesterheld examines reliance on ancestors as spirit-comrades by the Kanayatn of West Kalimantan in the Dayak–Madurese conflicts of 1997 and 2001, and the emergence of Pan-Dayak ancestry in connection with these events. In Chapter 7, Richard Payne describes formal and informal modes of communication with ancestors among the Benuaq of East Kalimantan, including a case of spontaneous possession by an ancestor, occasioning the ritual installation of him as a village protecting spirit. In the last chapter of the book, Christine Helliwell discusses a special form of collective ancestry

based on affiliation with ritually consecrated village house hearths and a set of associated objects among the Gerai of West Kalimantan.

Belying the relative invisibility of ancestors in the previous Borneo ethnography, the picture that emerges from the compilation of this material is one of considerable diversity, which differs in several ways from classical representations of ancestor worship in the ethnographic literature. Ancestors appear in a wide variety of manifestations and contexts: as guests or distant beneficiaries of offerings in mortuary and community rituals, as village guardians and personal protecting spirits, as assistants in curing rituals and warfare, as unsolicited visitors in dreams and involuntary possession, and as sources of political authority, cultural legitimacy, and social identity in public discourse.

Ancestors, Ancestry, and Ancestorship: A Theoretical Overview of Analytical and Indigenous Conceptions

Ancestorship is a complex multifunctional institution found widely throughout the world. It is claimed to be universal or near-universal, and it is reported from very different societies, although more commonly from small-scale as opposed to large-scale, and unilineal as opposed to bilateral, societies (Metcalf 1997, Steadman et al. 1996). It has been particularly often studied in unilineal societies – and most prominently by functionalists. The areas most famously associated with ancestorship in the ethnographic literature are Africa, China, Japan, and ancient Greek and Rome (Ahern 1973, Fortes 1959, 1965, 1976, Freedman 1967, Fustel de Coulanges 1900, Gluckmann 1937, Goody 1962, Granet 1951, Kopytoff 1971). Meyer Fortes is probably the most famous theorist of ancestorship, and the institution's functions of integrating descent groups and promoting elders' authority identified by him are central to the received view of it. It is also especially its sociological importance, as a vehicle of social organization, which has been investigated in greater depth. In comparison, its religious significance, and articulation with other aspects of religion, has been less extensively analyzed. Analysts have usually been content to note that it is not a religion in itself (e.g., Chambert-Loir and Reid 2002b: xviii, Fortes 1976: 3), while neglecting to pursue how it is integrated with other religious beliefs and practices.

Ancestor worship was an important topic in the early days of anthropology (e.g., Durkheim 1995, Frazer 1913–24, Spencer 1896, Tylor 1920) but the topic and term has lately gone out of favor, in part precisely because

of its association with evolutionary theory, including the hypothesis that it represented an early, primitive form of religion (Metcalf 1997). The term is also unpopular because of connoting a distinct religion and an overly reverent attitude on the part of the “worshippers” (e.g., Driberg 1936, Kopytoff 1971). Because of these connotations, we will not use it here but instead employ the more neutral term “ancestralship.” By this term we refer to the role and influence of “ancestors” in society, within and beyond the sphere of religion, more or less strictly defined. The semantic core of the term consists of the *relationship* of the living with the ancestors, and the latter encompass both presently existing spirit agencies (ancestor spirits) and formerly existing people of the past. Like ancestor worship, ancestralship may refer to a social institution, although in Borneo it is notably not much objectified as such. Being integrated with other aspects of religion and other societal domains such as politics, ancestralship is here an only analytically separable domain.

In order to demarcate more precisely this book’s subject field of ancestralship, it is necessary to clarify also our use of the term “ancestor.” Definitions of the term vary considerably, and its semantic spectrum is wide, and a source of confusion. As noted by Bernard Sellato in an article critical of the vague and unwarranted use of the term in Borneo, there is a huge difference between the “indiscriminate use of *ancestor* in our common [Western] vocabulary, which carries no more subtle an idea than that of forebear, and the anthropologist’s *ancestor*, which is a more complex concept,” especially, we may add, if the latter is taken to refer to the specialized usage in the African and Chinese ethnography on ancestor worship (2002: 1–2, original italics). We agree with Sellato that it is necessary, for the sake of analytical clarity, to distinguish between the range of potential referents of the term in its widest, often unreflective, usages, and to distinguish ancestors from spirits of the dead, on the one hand, and ordinary forebears, on the other. Malevolent spirits of the dead, such as those originating from women dying in childbirth, and forgotten, unimportant genealogical forebears are obviously not ancestors. Being dead and having a set of genealogical descendants is not yet sufficient – and in some cases actually not necessary – in order to become an ancestor.

Like Sellato (2002: 13–14), following Krauskopff (1991: 65) and Stöhr and Zoetmulder (1968: 222–223), we perceive that ancestralship is qualified by a social aspect, and that the term should be reserved for those individuals who are honored and constitute a reference for society, or who are contacted, in a capacity as ancestor spirits, because of being capable of providing something for the living, such as blessing or protection. Ancestors, in other words, are

distinguished from other dead and ordinary forebears by their positive *social significance* for society or people. In Borneo, they were usually also prominent while alive, and social merit often provides a decisive factor enabling the postmortal achievement of ancestral status. Social merit may not characterize ancestors everywhere – according to Fortes (1976: 9) it is indeed largely irrelevant for the acquisition of ancestral status in Africa and China – but in Borneo, and Southeast Asia more generally, it usually does, as recognized by O. W. Wolters, for whom this attribute provided the defining characteristic of ancestors – his “men of prowess” – as opposed to ordinary forebears in the region:

Ancestors were always those who, when they were alive, protected and brought benefits to the people . . . No special respect was paid to mere forebears in societies that practised cognatic kinship. Ancestor status had to be earned (1999: 19).

However, on the other hand, and in part for precisely this reason, we disagree with Sellato’s and some other Southeast Asianists uncritical, and sometimes equally unpremeditated, adoption of a narrow anthropological ancestor concept characteristic of Sino-African scholarship, which reflects the unilineal organization of the societies for which it has been developed, and also, we surmise, a general Western and former anthropological biological bias of understandings of kinship. In this usage, the meaning of the word ancestor is restricted to *genealogical* forebears, or more narrowly to socially significant genealogical forebears. A typical example of such a definition, intended for a general Indonesian context, is provided by Chambert-Loir and Reid (2002b: xix):

The term “ancestors” has two different meanings . . . The first embraces all genealogical forebears, however distant; the second is a limited category of forebears regarded as more potent than others, whose prominence the living society acknowledges.

One of the most extreme positions within this anthropological tradition of defining ancestorship on the basis of genealogical criteria is represented by Radcliffe-Brown, according to whom ancestor worship only occurs in unilineal societies. In his words, ancestor worship designates a “religion” in which the “cult group . . . consists solely of persons related to one another by descent in one line from the same ancestor or ancestors” (1952: 163). Fortes’s (1965: 124) definition of an ancestor as “a named dead forebear who has living descendants

of a designated genealogical class representing his continuing structural relevance” is not much more accommodating, although it theoretically allows for the possibility of ancestors occurring in cognatic societies.

In comparison with such definitions, we have in this book opted for a broader understanding of the ancestor concept, which is not restricted to one or another category of structurally or socially designated *genealogical* forebears, but which encompasses all influential predecessors from whom people trace social or genealogical ancestry. The reasons for this are both analytical and empirical. It is to enable comparison within Borneo and beyond of ancestors and ancestral-like agencies exhibiting a family resemblance, and it is to facilitate a theoretical understanding more congruent with the inclusive and flexible conceptions of ancestors that people typically have in Borneo societies, and the type of social organization and religious beliefs with which they are articulated in them.

A strongly genealogical understanding of ancestorship, such as Radcliffe-Brown's or Fortes's, would obviously be too restrictive in Borneo, in effect preventing application of the concept altogether. In Borneo, where kinship is bilateral, there are not any ancestor-worshipping cult groups of the sort referred to by Radcliffe-Brown, and rarely any other discretely operating groups, for that matter, formed on the basis of descent from a common ancestor (Appell 1976, King 1978), a notable exception being the bone ossuary-holding estates of some southern Borneo groups (see Hudson and Hudson 1978, Couderc, this volume).¹ However, families and communities still often recognize a set of common ancestors who are not related to all of their members. A classificatory tendency to collapse lineal with collateral, and often also affinal, relatives allows groups to regard a variety of ascendants as their ancestors even if they often only represent the lineal ancestors of some of them, and even if these ancestors sometimes lacked genealogical descendants of their own (such as in the case of celebrated bachelor warriors who died before producing offspring, or some famous but infertile leaders: see Couderc, Oesterheld, and Sillander, this volume). People are related to ascendants not just through consecutive lineal descent links but also indirectly through collateral connections on their own and their ascendants' generational levels (cf. Bloch 1971, Keesing 1971, Rosaldo 1975, Taylor and Aragon 1991: 42). As elsewhere in cognatic Southeast Asia, forebears “tend to be imagined as occurring in layers rather than in lines” (Errington 1989: 215), implying that local communities are divided into cohorts of generations within which lineal differentiation is played down, and ancestorship

perceived broadly in terms of generalized status superiority based on generational seniority.

Unlike in Africa, it is thus not in Borneo “critical . . . to have descendants of the right class for ancestors to receive worship” (Fortes 1976: 8–9). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, ancestral status, in the sense of a prominent place in the cultural memory of families, communities, or ethnic groups, or recognition as a source of blessing in ritual, is also, contrary to how Metcalf (1982) presents it, not restricted to people who underwent the full scale of proper mortuary rituals, nor, as Sellato (2002: 14) proposes, to people installed as ancestors in special installatory rituals – although both types of rituals occur in Borneo societies and significantly contribute to produce this effect in some cases. We have found that people, if influential or potent enough, can become ancestors even when such rituals have not been carried out (see Béguet, Couderc, this volume, and Metcalf 1982: 247–248 for the occurrence of this among the Berawan). This directs attention to a fundamental attribute of ancestorship, namely that it, unlike mere forebearship, is always, and most decisively, contingent upon recognition – indicating another sense in which it is intrinsically social.

Furthermore, Bornean ancestors are prominently invoked as an anonymous collectivity with the effect that ancestorship is not, as implied by Fortes’s definition, restrictively geneonymical (based on individualized invocation of ancestors by personal name), and thus not hampered by a greater or lesser degree of genealogical amnesia that might justifiably be attributed to some, if by no means all, Borneo societies. Moreover, to the extent that individual ancestors are singled out in ritual invocations or through reference in discourse, they are not selected solely or most primarily on the basis of genealogical connection. This testifies to a conception according to which ancestorship is not, in contrast to Fortes’s analytical view (1976: 4–10), restrictively predicated upon procreation and transmission of substantive faculties, but based more widely on constitutive or formational influence. This influence frequently consists of qualities such as exemplary initiative, social guidance and social (or spiritual) guardianship, of what the ancestors did or continue to do for the benefit of the living beyond the procreational act. In fact, ancestorship in Borneo is often more prominently predicated on such social influence than on progenitorship, consistent with a general Austronesian pattern of social identities being achieved as opposed to being given at birth (Fox 1987a: 174).

Like the propensity to invoke the ancestors as an anonymous collectivity, the tendency to invoke ancestors on the basis of social merit can be

understood with reference to inherent difficulties in bilateral societies to organize discrete and solidary groups on the basis of descent, given the pattern of optional affiliation with ascendants on the mother's and father's side, and resultant crosscutting kinship allegiances. As observed by William Geddes for the Bidayuh of Sarawak, both tendencies serve to enable unitary integration in bilateral societies, in the absence of a "genealogical system linking together all the members of a community" (1954: 26). In a sense, these tendencies have the effect of collectivizing the ancestors, providing a means for everybody in a community to feel equally affiliated with them even without personal descent connections.

In addition to not being restricted to direct lineal, ritually consecrated, or individually invoked representatives, people who serve as references for society or who are ritually contacted in a capacity as benevolent spirit agencies in Borneo also prominently include ancient mythological ancestors and culture heroes to whom genealogical ancestry often is not or cannot be traced (Couderc, Payne, Sather, Sillander, this volume). For this reason, we have extended the scope of the category of ancestorship examined here to include such distant predecessors. Characteristically, proximate ancestors in Borneo are not set apart from such beings by being perceived as fundamentally distinct or by playing a very different socio-religious role, contrary to the argument of Fortes, who saw the mythological totemic ancestors of Australian societies as "in no way comparable to the kind of ancestors who form a line of named, identified human progenitors such as we meet with in Chinese or Tallensi lineage and clan systems" (1976: 4). Instead, a continuum is perceived to exist between them, expressed by the fact that the proximate ancestors are often invoked together with the mythological ones and in their afterwordly existence commonly take up residence near them or the gods (see Oesterheld, Payne, Sather, Sillander, this volume, Geddes 1954: 24, Hopes et al. 1997: 15, Sather 1994: 119). Both categories of ancestors are also often invested with an elementary constitutive significance in Borneo societies, being seen as having enabled the existence and provided the cultural foundations of their "descendants," such as by initiating or handing down elementary institutions like customary law (*adat*), rituals, and rice cultivation.

Another somewhat special category of ancestors that will be examined in this volume is represented by what we will call "transformed ancestors." It is commonly perceived in Borneo that ancestors can be metamorphosed into various kinds of non- or super-human spirits, spirit-animals, animals, and even plants, and in those incarnations represent sources of such things as

protection, blessing, and fertility. As observed by Béguet for the Iban (2006, this volume), this testifies to an animistic ontology, which is shared with various hunter-gatherer societies. Several contributors to this book examine this important phenomenon (see especially Béguet and Couderc, but also Oesterheld, Payne, Sather, and Sillander) which, although sometimes mentioned in the earlier Borneo ethnography (see, e.g., Evans 1923: 40, 76–80, Hose and McDougall 1912, II: 80–81, 110–111, Kershaw 2000: 65–66, Metcalf 1982: 188, 253), has previously received little systematic consideration (see, however, Béguet 2006, 2007).

In addition to transformed ancestors, a related phenomenon of central importance in the contributions to this book is a heterogeneous category of “ancestral objects,” that is, objects that are inherited or otherwise obtained from the ancestors, or symbolically associated with them (see especially Couderc, Helliwell, Oesterheld, Sillander). Prominent examples of such objects include remains of the dead (ancestor skulls and other bones) and various types of heirlooms and other potent objects (ceramic jars, gongs, pearls, tiger teeth, stones, earrings, etc.), as well as different forms of shrines and offering places established by group or house founders, or associated with ancestral usage. Since the potency of these objects largely derives from the ancestors – particularly from prominent and powerful ones – and since practices involving these objects, and the unseen agencies with which they are typically associated, are centrally important in rituals and beyond in many Borneo societies, we have opted to extend the notion of ancestorship to them.

Taken together these observations testify to an inclusive and polythetic concept of ancestors in Borneo societies which is consistent with some basic properties of social structure and religion, including the bilateral and classificatory organization of kinship, and an animistic ontology recognizing a profusion of different life forms lacking fixed identities and boundaries. It bears witness to a conceptual continuum between ancestors and elders, on the one hand, and ancestors and other spirits, on the other, which is expressed also in the ways in which people refer to ancestors. Typically there are no specific terms for ancestors in the sense of lineal genealogical forebears. Local terms that are used for ancestors in this sense have a wider application and primarily denote either grandparents or great-grandparents (e.g., Bidayuh *sumuk babai*, Gerai *akei'-inei'*, Iban *aki'-ini'*, Modang *bo'*, Melanau *tipou*) or predecessors (Bentian *ulun tuha one*, Uut Danum *uLun oko' Lomoy*, Aoheng *do né moni maé*).²

On the basis of these observations we are now in a position to provide an analytical definition of the ancestor concept that is better suited to make sense of indigenous understandings of ancestors in Borneo societies. In our view, ancestors are people who live on in the memory of individuals, groups, or entire societies through what they have transmitted to them. They are beings from whom people trace genealogical or social ancestry, who stand in a constitutive relationship to them as influential predecessors without whom they would not quite be what they are or exist at all. They are important by in some fundamental sense enabling the existence of their successors. They can exert such a constitutive influence in two basic respects. Through what they did while still alive or through what they are perceived to do in a capacity as ancestor spirits. Often, albeit not always, there is a continuum in this respect, that is, between what they did while alive and what they are perceived to do as spirits. Indeed ancestors must, at least, be of continuous importance for the living. They must *live on through their influence*, either as contacted or otherwise influential spirits, or as remembered past characters taken into consideration. They must in some way be of service to the living. This is a necessary requirement. If they are not, they are just dead people, or mere forebears.

Obviously, ancestors must also have gone before, in order to be able to exert a *constitutive* influence. Ancestors, whether or not lineal and biological, are necessarily – and in Borneo often most essentially – *predecessors*, “those who came before,” as terms for them often literally have it. However, they need not in all respects be perceived as dead – and indeed are not in so far that they are ancestor spirits. In some Bornean cases they are not even seen to have undergone death (or mortuary rituals) before becoming spirits. As this suggests, death in itself is not, as Durkheim (1995: 83) noted, a sufficient, nor even, in contrast to Fortes’s view (1965: 125), a necessary condition for the achievement of ancestral status.

Ancestors and Ancestor Worship in the Ethnographic Literature on Borneo

The previous ethnographic literature on Borneo societies presents a highly ambiguous picture of the significance of ancestors in them. According to some accounts, ancestors appear to be rarely contacted and invoked (e.g, Avé 1990, Rousseau 1998, Sellato 2002), while others present purported cases of full-blown ancestor worship or a multicontextual ancestral importance (Geddes 1954, Mallinckrodt 1925, 1928, Metcalf 1982, 1989, Schärer 1963,

Stöhr 1988, Wadley 1999). Both ethnographic and conceptual factors contribute to this variance. Most of the reports that note a significant degree of ancestral involvement in human affairs concern the western and southern regions of the island. They pertain, in particular, to the Bidayuh and the Iban of Western Sarawak (Geddes 1954, Sather 2003, Wadley 1999), the Kanayatn (Kendayan) of West Kalimantan (Dunselman 1949–50, Schadée 1908, 1910, Stöhr and Zoetmulder 1965), and the Luangan, Ma'anyan and Ngaju of Central and East Kalimantan, who together with the Uut Danum (Ot Danum) of Central and West Kalimantan constitute the Barito language family (Hudson 1972, Mallinckrodt 1925, 1928, Schärer 1963, Sillander 2004, Zimmermann 1968). All societies in the present volume are located in that broadly defined geographical region. The claim by the German scholar Waldemar Stöhr that “ancestor worship is among all Dayak peoples an integrating factor in religion and society” (1988: 13, our translation; see also Mallinckrodt 1928, I, 67 ff. and Stöhr and Zoetmulder 1965: 190–194) is likewise mainly substantiated by examples from these western and southern societies, in particular from the Kendayan, and the Luangan and Ma'anyan, whose practices of commemorating ancestors through anthropomorphic effigies (*pantak*) and storing ancestor skulls, respectively, are among the most salient material manifestations of ancestorship in Borneo. To this ensemble of western and southern societies it is justified to add a number of related societies of central north Borneo, which form what Peter Metcalf (1975) called the “*nulang* arc” with reference to their practice of secondary burials, an institution which they share with the Barito group to the south. Although the importance of ancestors in these societies has mainly been discussed as a side topic in studies of their secondary burials or other topics (e.g., Metcalf 1982, 1989, Nicolaisen 1998, 2003), these studies make it clear that ancestors are centrally relevant in them too.

Ancestors appear less conspicuously in writings about central and north Borneo. Some authors explicitly mention their general lack of ritual importance (Evans 1922: 288, Rousseau 1998: 109, Sellato 2002). Among the Kayan of the Baluy river, “There is no ancestral cult, and no expectation that ancestral spirits should help their relatives” (Rousseau 1998: 109), and among the Aoheng of the upper Mahakam, the spirits of the dead, for whom Sellato categorically denies ancestral status, “never intervene in the affairs of the living” (Sellato 2002: 5). However, this does not mean that ancestors are altogether absent from these peoples’ worldview or beliefs. For example, central Borneo aristocratic families legitimize their special social status by tracing

descent from founding ancestors (Alexander 1993: 35), as do the leaders of their nomadic western Penan neighbors (Langub 2004), or from celestial spirits or culture heroes, from whom they have often inherited special powers or sacred objects (Guerreiro 1992, 2006, King 1985: 88, Nicolaisen 1976: 65, Nieuwenhuis 1900, I: 175–176, Rousseau 1998: 93, Sellato 1983: 32). For north Borneo, Evans reports a Dusun informant's statement that the spirits dwelling in heirloom jars are those of ancestors and that they are propitiated "when there is sickness in the house or village" (Evans 1923: 6).

Ethnographic differences aside, there are also differences in respect to what different individual authors, with different conceptual and theoretical understandings, make out of the same or more or less similar data. The importance of mortuary rites for engendering ancestor worship is a good case in point. Some authors use the term ancestors in the sense of souls of the dead who have become purified and installed in the afterworld as the result of having gone through mortuary rituals, often without consideration of whether they act as ancestors in relationships with the living (e.g., Schiller 2007). Some regard ancestral status as a direct development of mortuary rituals, attributing to the latter the function of transforming the deceased into active and benevolent ancestor spirits. Adopting this view, Metcalf regards Berawan secondary mortuary rituals involving exhumation of the deceased's bones as "ancestor factories," and describes mausoleums of past leaders as "the reliquaries of the cult of the ancestors" (1982: 23, 243).

Jan Avé (1990) and Bernard Sellato (2002), on the other hand, explicitly deny this function of mortuary rituals in Borneo, instead depicting them as a form of *rite de passage* concerned with ensuring the deceased's gradual removal from the world of the living. It is indeed not always clear how mortuary rituals bring about this transformation of the dead into ancestors – apart from that differential treatment sometimes demonstrates the higher status of some of the dead – especially not when ancestor worship concerns, as it often does, the forebears as an undifferentiated group, with no apparent consideration of whether individual representatives of them have gone through mortuary rituals or not.

A very different approach was followed by Anton Nieuwenhuis and other early observers who held the Tylorian-Frazerian view that ancestor worship is based on fear of the dead. According to Nieuwenhuis:

There is nothing to note in the way of an ancestor cult . . . among these tribes [i.e., the Bahau]. It is true that they fear graveyards and the corpses

of those whose sudden death by suicide, accident, murder, or during childbirth, has frightened them, and explain this [their death] as the punishment inflicted by the spirits for the fault of the deceased, but no cult is based thereupon other than the peculiar burial of these corpses. (Nieuwenhuis 1904–07, II: 469–470, our translation)

Of the same Bahau people, the missionary Pierre Vossen (1939: 84) wrote that they “have no respect for the dead, as we have, but only great fear and awe,” while another missionary noted the mixed feelings of fear and affection that the dead inspire among the Iban (J. Perham, quoted in Frazer 1933: 43). According to Elshout, however, fear of the dead motivated the Kenyah to make food offerings to them on every festive occasion, thus giving rise to a more permanent form of cult of the dead (1926: I, 133; see Tillema 1989: 232).

The earliest – and indeed strongest – proponent of the view that ancestor worship is a central feature of Dayak religions was the Dutch colonial administrator Jacob Mallinckrodt, who produced the first comparative work on Bornean social systems, *Het Adatrecht van Borneo* (1928). In this book, Mallinckrodt regarded ancestor worship as the cement of autonomous genealogical units whose members shared descent from an *oervader*, which he considered as the original form of Bornean (Dayak) social organization (1928, I: 109–110). He identified two principal expressions of ancestor worship:

1. Customary law (*adat*), ancestors being of great importance to maintain customary law and punish transgressions of it (1928, I: 67–68, 95, 173).
2. Community cults focused on stones, and sometimes other objects such as skulls, representing ancestral founders at village offering places (*dorps-offerplaats*) (1928, I: 68–76).

In Mallinckrodt’s view, the most primitive form of ancestor cult was practiced by the Lawangan of southeast Borneo, who used the skulls of ancestors as intermediaries in contacts with other spirits for many ritual purposes concerning the community (1925, 1928, I: 268–269). At a later stage of social and religious evolution, exemplified in south Borneo by the Ma’anyan and the Ngaju, ancestor skulls had become less systematically used while ancestor worship had yielded to a cult of non-ancestor spirits (*dewata*).

Another early observer who reached similar conclusions about ancestor worship in Borneo was the Swiss missionary Hans Schärer, who worked in south Borneo in the 1930s before studying ethnology in Leiden, where

he submitted his thesis *Die Gottesidee der Ngadju Dajak in Süd-Borneo* in 1946 (titled *Ngaju Religion* in the English translation). In this work, which was influenced by Dutch structuralism, Schärer described Ngaju religion as the manifestation of a “total community” encompassing the present and the past, the living and the dead, human society and the cosmos. For Schärer, Ngaju ancestor worship involved the ability of ancestors for whom secondary mortuary rites had been performed – the “sacred dead” – to personify this socio-religious totality at the level of the village or kin group, which on ritual occasions when the group assembled was manifested as a cosmic reunion of two divinities representing the upperworld and the underworld. Like Mallinckrodt, Schärer thus essentially conceived of the cult of the ancestors as a community cult. Through this cult the local community worshiped itself, as it were, in two different guises. First, in the community bone house (*sandong*), which symbolized the abode, and collectivity, of the dead. Second, in the guise of the tutelary spirit of the community offering place (*tajahan*), a hawk regarded by Schärer as the form taken by dead ancestors when they were contacted – always as a totality – in various extra-mortuary ritual contexts. Both the *sandong* bone houses and the protecting hawk-spirits had their counterparts at the tribal level. There was a tribal hawk-spirit in the upperworld which is the lord of all the hawk-spirits, and the village of the dead in the upperworld represented “the transcendentalised collectivity of all the *sandong* in the total community” (1963: 151–152, 160).³

Ancestors also appeared in a third guise in Schärer’s account of the Ngaju. Although Schärer explicitly rejected evolutionism in his interpretation of Ngaju ancestor worship (1963: 152), he adopted the influential Leiden thesis that phratry dualism once prevailed among most societies in the Malay archipelago. He regarded the peculiar form of the dual Ngaju godhead – a union between a hornbill and a watersnake – as an indication that ancient Ngaju society was once organized according to such a system and had totemic moieties and clans (1963: 155). In so doing, he was influenced by an early interpretation of Bornean masks by another Leiden scholar, W. H. Rassers (1928, cf. Schärer 1963: 142, fn.). Drawing on Mauss’s theory of the gift, Rassers had hypothesized that these masks, including those used in the Ngaju secondary mortuary ritual (*tiwah*), had formerly featured in *potlatch*-like great feasts in which intermarrying or allied communities came together to engage in agonistic exchange. In his interpretation, the masks originally represented the divine, totemic ancestors of these interacting groups, a type of hybrid beings who were part human, part animal (Rassers 1928: 62–63).

One can reasonably assume that Rassers influenced Schärer's interpretation of the masks used in the Ngaju *tiwah*, which Schärer, going beyond the evidence available at his time or later (e.g., Schiller 1997: 106), proposed represented "the ancestors and the dead" (1963: 139). Evidently, what Schärer referred to as ancestors here were divine totemic beings similar to those discussed by Rassers – hawks, hornbills, and watersnakes – who personified the community extended to the dead and beings of the wider cosmos.

Although he did not provide many details about the concrete manifestations of Ngaju ancestor worship (but see Schärer 1966: 223, Zimmermann 1968: 393), Schärer thus delineated three fundamental spheres of ancestorship among them. First, one that arises from mortuary rituals in which relations with deceased genealogical forebears are mediated by bone repositories; second, one represented by village shrines which mediate relations with community ancestors in a more indirect and anonymous manner; and finally, one in which the ancestors are transposed or assimilated into godly totemic creatures associated with cosmic moieties.

While Schärer's uncritical adoption of the Leiden schemes of dualistic classification and the conjectural historiography on which they are based may be criticized, his model of three spheres of ancestorship may have a general validity beyond the Ngaju for understanding ancestors in Borneo. It implicates a classificatory scheme explaining co-variation of some distinctive traits of Borneo ancestorship along a complex gradient. The more genealogically distant the ancestors, and the larger the social unit claiming ancestry from them, the more anonymous and dehumanized they tend to be, becoming increasingly associated or merged with non-human beings, animal-like figures, mythological heroes, gods and the like.

Independently of Hertz, whose influence was not yet widespread among Borneo ethnographers, Mallinckrodt and Schärer thus initiated an approach to ancestorship that focused on its symbolic importance to represent collective identity (from which the ritual importance of ancestor spirits was seen to derive). This symbolic dimension of ancestor worship has lately been resumed by authors who describe how ancestors are venerated, not only in a capacity as spirit agencies that provide spirit guardianship, but also through their descendants' adherence to the ancestral heritage and cultural institutions such as mourning prohibitions, customary law, and naming practices. For example, Reed Wadley argues that the living among the Iban, by following mourning taboos and ritual practices, show respect for the recent dead and communicate to one another the value of the rules of customary law and

of the ancestors who instituted them, in effect worshipping the ancestors, in the literal sense of “demonstrating their worth” (1999: 595, 605). Sillander examines the significance of Bentian ancestors as sources of an authority that imbues ritual objects, ritual language, customary law, and living elders (2004: 216–221, 276–277). For the Punan Bah, who all used to be named after one or several ancestors, Ida Nicolaisen reports how ancestral names perform several symbolic functions: commemorating long gone ancestors, invoking their protection, expressing beliefs in reincarnation, and identifying “the individual as a member of a cognatic group with associated rights and duties” (1998: 373).

While these studies demonstrate the importance of the ancestors as symbols of social values and norms embedded in traditional institutions, they present a more complex picture than Mallinckrodt and other early writers about the ancestors’ role in maintaining such values and norms. Mallinckrodt’s claim that ancestors punish deviations from customary law is not clearly substantiated nor supported in the ethnographic literature.⁴ Instead, what these studies and some of the contributions to this volume (Appleton, Couderc, Payne, Sillander) suggest is that the ancestors rarely themselves sanction breaches, even though it is common that spirits – which often represent the guardian spirits of the ancestors – or other forms of supernatural retribution do.⁵ This is an intriguing and widespread feature of Austronesian ancestors (see, e.g., Bloch 1971: 125, Chambert-Loir and Reid 2002b: xxi). It is consistent with their predominantly benevolent role shared by their Chinese counterparts who also do not usually act as “moralistic arbiters of their descendant’s behavior” (Kerner 1976: 208). It also reflects the fact that ancestors, when forming the object of this kind of “symbolic worship”, are primarily conceived of as formerly living people rather than as ancestor spirits.

Mortuary Rituals and their Role in Creating Ancestorship: Hertz and Beyond

An intriguing question illuminated by the contributions to this volume is to what extent ancestors may be seen as the outcome of mortuary rituals. In classical Sino-African studies of societies practicing ancestor worship, mortuary rituals are regarded as integral to the process of making ancestors. “When mourning is over, the Ancestor is made; his cult begins,” wrote Granet about classical China (1951: 58, our translation). By contrast, Hertz’s theory of death, which was based largely on Bornean materials, provides an altogether different understanding of the importance of mortuary rituals in this respect.

For Hertz, south Bornean double obsequies were the exemplary institutional form of an *autonomous* mortuary process, oriented toward its own resolution. The role played by ancestors in this process, although not entirely insignificant, was rather peripheral. Being associated with the manipulation of bones, secondary mortuary rituals could become the starting point of regular cults focused on the remains of distinguished ancestors or other objects representing them. With characteristic ethnographic sensitivity, Hertz identified several examples of such cults of ancestral relics in the Malay Archipelago including Borneo. However, he also noted that the final mortuary ceremony does not generally have this character of a cult. On the contrary, the development of ancestor worship involved a “serious change in the nature of the final obsequies” (Hertz 1960: 57; see also 136, fn. 181, 72). In his perspective, second funerals served primarily to *integrate* the deceased into a community of dead forebears – not to *transform* them into ancestors – with no consideration of the regulative role they might play later, or the type of presence they might continue to have in their descendants’ life.

A society of the dead is nevertheless necessary to bring the process of death to completion. If, at the one end, the deceased are rejected from the society of the living – an aspect of Hertz’s analysis to which it is often reduced (Lévy-Bruhl 1960: 134, Parkin 1996: 112, 114) – there must at the other end be a pole of attraction ensuring that they go somewhere and do not stay indefinitely in a liminal state in which they are dangerous for the survivors. Most Dayak societies used to entertain beliefs about a remote place where the dead assemble (see Amster 2003: 280, for an apparent exception). Funeral chants describe the long and arduous journey of the departed soul and how, upon arrival in this abode, which is typically conceived of as a village or longhouse, it is welcomed by formerly deceased relatives and long dead ancestors (Elshout 1926: 39ff., Hardeland 1858: 272–273, quoted in Hertz 1960: 59, Metcalf 1982: 225, Uchibori 1978: 206). For Hertz this basically happy ending revealed the final victory of collective consciousness over the upsetting event of death, while the society of the ancestors into which the newly dead are aggregated represented a projection of the living society into “the realm of the ideal” (Hertz 1960: 79).

As this suggests, the community of the ancestors is to Hertz’s theory of death what the totem is to Durkheim’s theory of primitive religion, a hypostasis of a collective and impersonal social bond represented by a material symbol – in this case the family tomb containing the deceased’s remains. For the Ngaju, argued Hertz, the celestial town of the dead is the

“soul,” or “spiritual substance,” of the collective receptacle in which their bones are placed during the *tiwah* ceremony. This identification he regarded as encapsulated in a reported sentence of a Ngaju man reacting to a sermon of a missionary: “Our heaven is the *sandong*” (1960: 60, 138).

The Hertzian pattern of the double funeral can thus neither be conflated with classical ancestor worship, nor reduced to its basic function of separating the dead from the living, which is the common denominator of mortuary rites throughout the world. It does attribute to the spirits of the dead a form of ancestorship, although one predicated not on the acquisition of personal ancestral status or ancestral agency by the deceased but on the ancestors’ collective impersonation of society’s immortality and authority. Despite criticism of Hertz’s tendency to reify society (see Bloch and Parry 1982: 6, Goody 1962: 27), this strand of his theory has had a fruitful posterity in later anthropological research on mortuary rituals. In his study of the Merina of Madagascar, for example, Maurice Bloch (1971) argues that mortuary rites progressively depersonalize the deceased and regroup them in family tombs representing idealized descent groups. In Borneo, Metcalf claims that the secondary mortuary ritual of the Berawan “offers a mystical union with the ancestors that reinvigorates the entire community” (1982: 157). A similar temporary merging of the living and the dead occurs during the annual visits to cemeteries made by the Melanau to honor their deceased relatives, or at the climax of the Iban festival for the dead, when the spirits of new and ancient deceased crowd the longhouse of the feast holders as guests, and similar, albeit less developed, notions of temporary unification with deceased relatives are present in south Borneo societies, too (Appleton, Couderc, Sather, Sillander, this volume, Schiller 1997: 104).

Equally frequently, however, and often concomitantly, the living community projects its unity and solidarity *against* the dead, who then do not appear as ancestors but as what may be described as “counter people” (McKinley 1976) in reference both to their ambivalent or hostile attitude towards the living, and to the inverted world in which they live (where perceptions, predilections, etc., are reversed, small appearing large, night as day, and so on). This aspect of the dead and of the integrative function of secondary funerals is expressed during cockfights, contests, masquerades, competitive drinking, and other ritual activities opposing two camps – guests versus hosts, ritual specialists versus other participants, men versus women – which often take on a marked agonistic character (Bonoh 1984–85, Sather 1993 and this volume, Schärer 1963, Couderc, Payne, Sillander, this

volume). In many Borneo societies, including the Bentian and Uut Danum, it is also manifested by a consistent, explicit reference in discourse to the living as *living* people and the deceased as *dead* ones (cf. Bloch 1971: 221).

Both the festivals for the dead of Western Borneo peoples like the Iban and the Taman of West Kalimantan, and the secondary burial rituals in south Borneo, are major events in the social life of local communities, involving massive participation of village members, including people who have moved out, and of outsider visitors as part of recurring cycles of exchange between neighboring communities (Couderc, this volume and personal observation of a Taman *mamandung* ritual, Hudson 1966: 402, Schiller 1997: 65, Sather 2003: 237, and this volume). The collective dimension of final mortuary rites, and their significance for representing social integration on the local and supra-local levels, is particularly evident among the Paju Epat Ma'anyan of Central Kalimantan, who perform periodic mass cremations (*ijambe*) during which families of upriver "daughter villages" bring back the bones of their recently dead to the home village to be burnt at the local cremation site (Hudson 1966, Mallinckrodt 1927). The collective mausoleums (*tambak*) into which the ashes of the newly deceased are mixed with those of earlier deceased relatives at the conclusion of the *ijambe* (Hudson 1966: 397) have individual names from which the names of the kinship groups who own them are derived. The *tambak* groups, described by Mallinckrodt (1927: 566–573) as primary organic divisions of the tribe (*stam*), are in fact optional and occasional descent groups, functioning as such mainly in the context of funerary rituals, although they do also own non-funerary property in the form of heirlooms (Hudson 1966: 358, 1972: 91). Compared with other Paju Epat social units, they are nevertheless characterized by a high degree of permanence and corporateness, as well as a tendency for endogamy (Mallinckrodt 1927: 561). This reflects the rather unique power of mortuary rites and sentiments of obligation towards the dead to generate sociability and group solidarity in Borneo societies, consistent with a general Austro-nesian pattern whereby group membership in life is multiple, elective, and negotiable, and permanently established only after death (Astuti 1995, Bloch 1971, Fox 1987a).

The role of secondary mortuary rituals in symbolically manifesting and temporarily congregating kin or other social units (e.g., Houses) through reference to house-shaped bone repositories containing the remains of deceased members is also evident among other south Borneo societies such as the Ngaju and the Uut Danum (Schiller 1997, Couderc, this volume).

However, it is, in fact, not limited to societies who practice secondary burial. Among the Iban who do not, and lack such repositories, this is achieved through the *gawai antu* festival for the dead, described by Saribas Iban elders as a rite of “house building” (*berumah*) aimed to provide the dead with a longhouse in the otherworld (Sather, this volume). Through this rite of house building, Sather argues, “the *gawai [antu]* constitutes the sponsoring longhouse, for its duration, as a discrete ritual community in relation to the longhouse of its visitors” (2003: 237).

While mortuary feasts are events of remarkable grandeur and considerable significance for the identity and symbolic reproduction of local communities in societies that practice secondary burial in central north Borneo (Amster 2003, Metcalf 1982, Nicolaisen 2003), social integration with reference to bone ossuaries is here achieved differently than in the south, consistent with the fact that they typically contain the remains of individual ancestors rather than of entire families. The huge and richly carved tomb posts which the Melanau, Punan Bah, Berawan and other *nulang* arc peoples erect for the deceased of high standing (Appleton, this volume, Nicolaisen 1984, Metcalf 1976, Leach 1950), and the comparable Kelabit practice of cutting clearings and ditches in the forest to memorialize individual deceased (Bulan 2003), surpass any funeral monuments made by the Barito peoples, although the latter do occasionally build separate bone (or skull) repositories for prominent individuals and award special recognition to founders of collective repositories (Hudson 1966, Venz 2002: 107, Weinstock 1983: 125). Consequently, secondary mortuary rituals in central north Borneo do not try to establish social integration through recourse to the symbolic isomorphism between houses of the living and houses of the dead highlighted by Hertz, but instead seek to achieve this end through the celebration of individual ancestors – aristocrats or men of prowess, depending on whether we are dealing with stratified or competitive-egalitarian societies – who symbolically stand for the society as a whole.

Another difference between the north and the south, which reveals the limitations of Hertz’s transitional approach to mortuary rituals for an understanding of ancestorship, relates to body symbolism. The body, as is well known, provides for Hertz a medium for the metaphorical representation of the difficult process that the collective consciousness must go through in order to overcome the disrupting effect of death. More precisely, as the Uut Danum case illustrates, it provides several metaphors which represent, successively, the dissolution of the deceased’s personhood (through the

decaying corpse), the deceased's new body (through the bones), and the society or kinship group into which the deceased is reintegrated at the end of the mortuary process (through the collective ossuary into which the exhumed bones are placed). Among the Punan Bah, however, as argued by Nicolaisen (2003), bodily metaphors not only describe the separation and integration of the individual and society at different stages of the mortuary process but also testify to notions of a regenerative power of death and death rituals. The same careful operations of collecting and cleansing exhumed bones, which for the Uut Danum and their Ngaju neighbors aim to reconstitute complete bodies for the deceased in their distanced existence in the afterworld, serve among the Punan Bah the purposes of collecting the fertility of the ancestors and of releasing the soul from its "cage" (the bones) in order to enable its rebirth in a descendant. This process is controlled by the ancestors themselves, who "decide when and through whom they will be reincarnated" (2003: 140).

The example of the Punan Bah clearly demonstrates that there is more to mortuary rituals in Borneo in terms of how they serve to establish ancestorship than the generation of an ideal afterworldly society of ancestors embodying sentiments of social solidarity. This book gives ample evidence that they may also exert a direct influence on the emergence of ancestral agency. Such influence is illustrated perhaps most clearly in Sillander's discussion of the Bentian *gombok* secondary mortuary ritual, which through the differential treatment of two contrarily-valued spirits of the deceased enables one of them to become an ancestral protecting spirit.

Even when forms of ancestral agency are produced through special post-mortuary rites of installation, mortuary rites are often a necessary stage in the process whereby ancestor status is acquired by selected deceased. This is obvious in the ritual practices concerning ancestral skulls among the south Borneo peoples of the eastern Barito region, which, as Hertz observed, bear on relics that are the final product of mortuary rites. The chapters by Sillander and Payne on the Bentian and Benuaq in this volume illustrate the entire process that starts at death and ends with the installation of these relics through secondary mortuary rituals. The role of mortuary rituals is less obvious for the Kanayatn rites of the installation of outstanding ancestors described by Oesterheld, since these rites are not focused on skulls taken out of the collective bone repositories to be stored in houses as among the Bentian and Benuaq, but on anthropomorphic effigies placed in special locations in the forest. However, early sources mention that the effigy (*pantak*)

representing the ancestor was carved either shortly after the burial, or after a successful headhunt, the latter probably conducted, in accordance with customary Bornean practice, to mark the end of mourning (Schadée 1910: 469, 474–475, Stöhr and Zoetmulder 1965: 191). This invites considering the erection of the *pantak* as the concluding act of the mortuary ritual, similar in this respect to a custom reported for some Ngaju Dayaks who placed wooden effigies and stones representing the deceased in outdoor village shrines at the end of the *tiwah* (Schärer 1963: 147–148).

The case of the Iban conveys a more complex, and ambivalent, picture of how ancestorship is influenced by mortuary rituals. Among the Iban, the achievement of ancestral status by the deceased is marked by their inclusion in the category of *petara*, which also includes powerful upperworld beings conventionally called “gods” in Iban studies. There are, however, two distinct processes through which people may attain status as *petara* – involving radically different conceptions of the fate of the dead – which are described by Sather and Béguet in this volume. The first process, explored by Sather, is that of mortuary rituals culminating in the festival for the dead (*gawai antu*). The *gawai antu* combines Hertz’s final mortuary ceremony with a ritual of commemoration. As a final ceremony, it plays out the reunion of the newly deceased with the long-dead in Sebayán, the Iban afterworld. By itself this does not amount to more than the acquisition of symbolic “Hertzian” ancestorship outlined above. As a ritual of commemoration performed once in a generation, however, it entails a periodic return of the deceased as honored ritual visitors. This role of spirit visitors confers on the deceased an ontological status comparable to that of the upperworld *petara*, involving a capacity to “bestow honor and material blessings upon their human hosts” (Sather 2003: 242). This amounts to a more significant transformation of the dead into benevolent ancestors effected in the course of mortuary rituals.

The second process, which concerns a small minority of the deceased, represents an altogether different path towards attaining ancestral status. Instead of being established collectively as a separate community in Sebayán with which ritual contacts are entertained only intermittently, the dead may be maintained as individual presences in the immanent world of the living in the form of invisible guardian spirits. For some deceased of outstanding renown this status is obtained through the disposal of their remains in special mausoleums (*lumbong*) placed outside villages. Although this process involves a form of secondary treatment and leads, to use Hertz’s terminology, to a “cult of relics,” it notably reverses the ideology that informs double

obsequies (Couderc 2007: 217). Others, who have received normal burial, who are the ones on whom Béguet principally focuses her analysis, become personal spirit helpers for their descendants upon revelations by the latter that they have become transformed into animals. Presenting a number of such cases, Béguet develops an original interpretation of Iban ancestorship which achieves its full significance from the fact that the human origin and acquired animality of these deceased are also characteristics of the mythical heroes and upperworld *petara* – who have indeed been identified as “cosmic ancestors” by some Ibanologists, including Sather (1994). She thus proposes that the main process through which ancestorship is created among the Iban is not ritual but metamorphosis, although she observes that the status of *petara* obtained through extra-ritual means is consecrated during the *gawai antu*, and that such deceased who have “become *petara*” are commemorated particularly intensely during it. This is a major departure from a ritualistic paradigm viewing ancestorship, in Borneo and elsewhere, as the outcome of mortuary or postmortuary ritual processes.

Representations of Ancestors in Borneo Societies

The contributions to this book demonstrate a complex religious and ideological significance of ancestors in Borneo and a plurality of manifestations of ancestral agencies and potency. There is no question but that ancestors are generally important in Borneo societies, including in their indigenous religions. But it is also clear that the form and degree of their importance varies considerably between different societies, explaining, in part, the divergent impressions of previous observers. Nevertheless, various more or less general patterns exist. Many characteristics of ancestors and ancestorship in Borneo are quite widespread, allowing a systematic overview of them.

A useful way to examine these characteristics is to focus on the representations of ancestors that occur in different societies. As Appleton in this volume observes, since ancestors cannot be seen, it cannot really be known what they are like (cf. Middleton 1960: 32). Not only is ancestorship, as already noted, contingent upon recognition by the living, but ancestors appear only in manifestations of them perceived as such by the living. To conceive of or talk about ancestors the living have to represent them in some ways, that is, there has to exist some concepts, terms, and material objects which are understood to refer to them, some agreed-upon conventional signs and symbols in empirical reality and language that stand for these absent

referents. In order to systematically describe the different representations of ancestors that are salient in the conceptual universes, ritual practices, public discourses, and physical environments of Borneo peoples, we have divided these representations into three categories: notions of ancestor spirits and potency in the realm of the spirit world; bodily remains and material objects mediating contacts with ancestor spirits or the influence of dead ancestors; and notions of an ideational ancestral heritage including knowledge, values, rules, rights, taboos, etc. These are categories that are likely to be found everywhere where there is an incidence of ancestorship. Indeed, for ancestorship as a set of enduring social practices and notions relating to ancestors to become cogent and viable, some measure of more or less objectified representations of ancestors pertaining to each of them is presumably vital.

Representations of Ancestors and Ancestral Potency in the Unseen World

As William Newell (1976: 22) observed, "There can be no ancestors unless there is some part of the personality which is totally separate from the body." That is to say that ancestor worship, in his view, presupposes the existence of an idea of a soul or spirit which is capable of outliving a person's physical existence. This idea reflects an understanding of ancestor worship as a religious phenomenon, involving not just reverence for ancestral predecessors but also ritual relations with ancestor spirits in the form of "prayer, libation, sacrifice, and other like activities" (Fortes 1976: 3). Ancestorship in the wide sense understood in this book is in fact not limited to such relations, but pertains also to institutionalized reverence for ancestors as important predecessors of the past, in which capacity they hold an influential symbolic significance in Borneo. Nevertheless, ritual and extra-ritual relations with spirits of the dead do represent an important form of ancestorship in many Borneo societies.

In Borneo, as in other Austronesian societies, there is a consistent belief in a soul or life-force (or sometimes several) which is associated with but detachable from the body, and which upon death continues to exist as – or is somehow transformed into or replaced by – a spirit of the dead. However, there is significant variation in terms of the degree to which spirits of the dead are present in what might be termed the "spiritual landscape" of different Borneo societies, and the degree to which they exert a benevolent or authoritative influence, which justifies the attribution of ancestral status to

them. Spirits of the dead do not in all cases represent ancestor spirits with whom lasting relations are purposively maintained in order to obtain some benefits. Indeed, in the immediate period following death they are everywhere perceived as mostly malevolent, and the living are primarily concerned with severing relations with them by facilitating, through the performance of mortuary rites, their transition to the typically distant afterworld – variably located on a mountain, in heaven, or in an invisible downriver realm – after which these relations in some cases ideally and actually come to an end. The spirit of the dead of the Uut Danum (*Liow*), Melanau (*a-matai*), and Gerai (*antu*) provide typical examples of this scenario. These Bornean spirits of the dead are rarely the subject of prayers or sacrifice for human well-being, and do not after completed mortuary rites exhibit a prominent presence in the imagination or ritual practices of these societies, although in the initial period after death they may, in accordance with a typical pattern, provide medicine, information about potent objects, and advice through communication in dreams or in the form of parting gifts received during the mortuary rituals (Appleton, Couderc, and Helliwell, this volume; see Sather 2003, Schiller 1997: 38).

This situation contrasts markedly with one which prevails in other Borneo societies, exemplified in this volume by the Bentian, Benuaq, Iban, and Kanayatn, where the spirits of the dead, after completion of the mortuary rituals, do exercise a significant influence as ancestor spirits by providing sources of blessing or potency, or by acting as spirit helpers in rituals or other contexts. Among these groups, the life soul and other aspects of the living person go through several kinds of transformation upon death, resulting in a number of forms of benevolent influence of different categories of spirits and potencies of the dead.⁶

The Iban provide an interesting and complex illustration of these processes and influences, systematically described by Sather. When dying, an individual becomes a spirit (*antu*), at first identified with but progressively detached from the decaying body. After an initial period of lingering unhappily near its former residence, this spirit gradually settles down among its predecessors in the unseen, downstream-located afterworld (Sebayan). From here it is called back, along with its cohort-mates, after having first become increasingly dissociated from its this-worldly existence through the performance of two preceding mortuary rituals, as guests to the major festival for the spirits of the dead (*gawai antu*), which is hosted, roughly once in a generation, by the living community, and during which it is believed to

offer gifts from the afterworld that bestow vitality and prosperity on them in exchange for being commemorated. After this ritual, which completes the full cycle of mortuary rituals, it becomes integrated with the *petara*, the upperworld gods and mythological ancestors, and may henceforth be addressed in this capacity, or as part of an anonymous collectivity of “grandmothers and grandfathers” (*aki’-ini*) in prayers for human well-being in other ritual and extra-ritual contexts.

In addition to a spirit of the dead, the Iban also recognize a distinct “soul” (*semengat*) of the dead, which represents the continuing existence of the life soul. Although not as important as the spirit of the dead in interaction with the living, or as an agency capable of bestowing well-being upon them, this component of the self is regarded as a source of regeneration of life as a result of eventually becoming transformed, after going through a number of deaths and rebirths in the Sebaran afterworld, into mist which falls to earth as dew and thus nourishes young rice plants, inducing an Iban notion of rice as the embodiment of the ancestors. A somewhat similar process of transformation is undergone by yet another component of living persons recognized by the Iban, the plant-image (*bungai*), an invisible counterpart of the self represented by a bamboo stalk attached to a family clump (representing the family to which one belongs) which grows in an invisible garden tended by ancestral shamans. During the second Iban mortuary ritual, the *besebara’ bungai*, this plant is cut off from the family rootstock in order to preserve the latter’s vitality and enable the emergence of new shoots from it.

As Sather observes, the Iban beliefs about the different components of the self – spirits, souls, and plant-images – all in different ways testify to a notion of regeneration of life from death. This notion is echoed sporadically in many Borneo societies although it does not represent the predominant attitude towards the dead or death. It is evident, for example, in a widespread idea that the soul or spirit of the dead, like the Iban *semengat*, eventually disintegrates to become recycled as a substance absorbed into sour fruits consumed by pregnant women (see Couderc, Sillander, this volume). Notions of the more straightforward reincarnation of particular individual ancestors into particular descendants also occur in several Borneo societies (Hose and McDougall 1912, II: 47, Metcalf 1982: 252, Schiller 1997: 39). They are especially prominent in the unique case of the Punan Bah, described by Nicolaisen (1998), among whom everyone used to take the name of and be reincarnated by an ancestor. The Punan Bah represent a special case also in

that their mortuary rituals – and especially those undergone by members of the upper stratum in their society – are vital for the reproduction of the fertility and vitality of the living, by being instrumental in enabling the dead to be reborn, and in allowing the transfer of “animate essence” (*etun*) from the dead and their personal guardian spirits (*otu tua*). This potency animates everything living and is most strongly associated with the divine and immortal mythological ancestors (*etun o’a*), from whom the nobility descend, and with the latter’s personal guardian spirits (which sometimes include mythological ancestors) on whose support community well-being is understood most decisively to depend.

It is thus clear that there exist notions throughout Borneo of what a leading authority on Austronesian societies, James Fox, has identified as a basic tenet of traditional religion in them, a view that “life depends upon death, that creation derives from dissolution” (1987b: 525), or of what Bloch and Parry have formulated as “a logical connection between the conception of life as a limited good and the idea that death and reproduction are inextricably related” (1982: 9). But potency associated with the souls or spirits of the ancestors is generally not automatically released upon death or a direct function of death *per se*. Generally, it has in some way to be distilled through a purification of the dead achieved through the mortuary rituals, or alternatively, as some of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, established through some form of ontological transformation of them occurring outside ritual. And in many cases, it is only some of the dead – “true ancestors,” in the sense of especially potent or influential community members – that become influential ancestral agencies after death, indicating the fundamental fact that there is a continuum between potency manifested in life and after death, or as Sather phrases it, that “life and death interpenetrate.”

Among the Kanayatn of West Kalimantan, described by Oesterheld, another people recognizing a plurality of benevolent agencies and potencies of the dead, the soul or spirit of the dead (*sumangat*), which represents the continuation of the life soul, does not wield an active influence except in the case of certain outstanding individuals (shamans, warriors, leaders, etc.) who unlike other dead do not settle down in the ordinary afterworld (*sabayatn*, in this case located in heaven) but go to stay among the *jubata* or *kamang* with whom they ultimately merge. The latter are two composite categories of spirits including upperworld and forest spirits and distant ancestors with whom genealogies are no longer remembered, which play important roles as addressees of ritual requests for assistance in matters of

life and death, respectively. They are referred to respectfully by teknonyms as “grandparents” and sometimes identified as a distinct kind of (mythological) ancestors (*leluhur*, Indonesian). The selected dead who go to stay among them primarily act as mediators in the living’s contacts with them, although they may also be contacted with requests for services in their own right.

Besides these two manifestations of ancestral agencies, the Kanayatn also recognize that powerful men, unlike others, possess a kind of “divine soul substance” (*pama*) which is “attached” to their souls (*sumangat*). Certain heirlooms such as weapons and jars may also be associated with *pama*, which seems to form an example of a transmissible and all-pervading force of the same order as *mana* and *semangat*, as described elsewhere in the Malayo-Polynesian world (e.g., Anderson 1972, Codrington 1891, Errington 1989, Kruyt 1906). Notions of such a substantive spiritual potency are somewhat atypical in Borneo, although they are also found in at least a couple of other societies, the Punan Bah and Kelabit of Sarawak, where it is known, respectively, as *etun* and *lalud* and most strongly associated – as among the Kanayatn – with prominent living and dead men and ultimately derived from the mythological ancestors or primeval gods (Nicolaisen 2003, Janowski, personal communication).

The Kanayatn *pama* has the capacity to “diffuse blessings upon the whole community” and may after a powerful individual’s death be ritually transferred to an anthropomorphic *pantak* wooden effigy commemorating the deceased in order to retain it within the community. The *pantak* are sometimes placed in sacred sites in the forest (*padagi*), where they constitute major sources of potency and assistance sought in ritual, although the potency of the *pama* can exclusively be sought by people who descend from the deceased, unlike power and help from the *kamang* and *jubata* – to whom appeals are also made at the *pantak* – who represent the “common property” of entire communities and regions.

Finally, there is also found among the Kanayatn another form of unseen, ancestor-derived power – called *tariu* – which may be acquired through rituals performed at the *pantak*. It is invoked especially in warfare and head-hunting, and associated specifically with the *kamang*. Interestingly, it was this form of potency which was most commonly sought by Dayak warriors in the recent clashes between Dayaks and Madurese immigrants to Borneo analyzed by Oesterheld, consistent with the fact that the Dayak warriors were recruited from different areas and ethnic groups and often lacked descent connections to the people commemorated through the *pantak*.

Nevertheless, its acquisition in rituals had to be preceded by other rituals conducted by descendants of the latter, during which they were consulted and asked for blessings and assistance.

The closely interrelated Bentian and Benuaq of southeast Borneo, examined by Sillander and Payne, represent a third case of Borneo societies with several categories of ancestor spirits that exercise a multifaceted benevolent influence. They recognize two oppositionally-defined spirits of the dead, *liau* and *kelelungan*, which come into being upon death when the life soul (*juus*) expires. The former, associated with the body and body bones, is principally malevolent and debilitating, while the latter, associated with the head and skull, is principally benevolent and helpful. The parallel existence of these spirits forms an unusual symbolic expression of the ambiguous attitudes of avoidance and reverence that Borneo people typically have toward the dead, which more commonly are expressed in a scheme of lineal progression from an initially unclean and miserable, malevolent spirit of the dead toward a gradually more purified and detached, benevolent ancestor spirit (e.g., Sather, this volume, for the Iban, and Metcalf 1982, for the Berawan). Relations with both *liau* and *kelelungan* extend beyond the performance of the multi-staged mortuary rituals, which serve to install them in their respective afterworlds on Mount Lumut in Central Kalimantan, and in the abode of Tenangkai in heaven. Both are frequently contacted in a variety of rituals, sometimes individually and by name, and sometimes as an anonymous collectivity, and they also appear in dreams and possession experiences, testifying to a remarkable salience of spirits of the dead in the spiritual landscape of the Bentian and Benuaq. But whereas separation is at all times stressed with *liau*, including when offerings are given to it, *kelelungan* is mostly contacted with requests for various favors (although it may also contact the living unsolicited with requests of its own).

Consequently, *kelelungan* represents an unusually clear case of ancestral spirit agency, comparatively unadulterated by the negative attitudes toward the dead as an incapacitating and dangerous influence that elsewhere in Borneo are projected upon spirits of the dead even when they do exercise a benevolent, ancestral agency. After the mortuary ritual *kelelungan* is said to become a protecting spirit (*pengiring*, *pengngirikng*) which takes an active interest in its descendants' and other community members' affairs, and which as part of the collectivity of predecessors into which it is integrated becomes a source of blessings in rituals, including curing, harvest, and community

rituals. Together with some of the mythological ancestors, the *kelelungan* of dead shamans also represent the principal spirit helpers (*mulung*, *mulukng*) of living shamans in both life rituals (*belian*) and mortuary rituals (*wara*). Reflecting their special spiritual status, some of these ancestral shamans do not stay with other *kelelungan* in Tenangkai but in another heavenly afterworld of their own (Jaa Jatus), as do their counterparts in some other Borneo societies where they represent the principal spirit helpers in ritual (see Sather, this volume, and Appell and Appell 2003).

Some other *kelelungan*, usually representatives of prominent community members such as leaders and shamans, may in their turn be called back from the afterworld to become protecting spirits among the living associated with the skull of the deceased, which in a special post-mortuary ritual may be taken out of the bone repository in which it was placed upon exhumation and brought to the house to become an object of blood lustration in house and community rituals (see Payne's chapter for an example of the ritual installation of such a spirit). In such cases *kelelungan* is transformed into a distinct type of ambiguously ancestral being called *nayyuq* (or *naiyu*). Resembling the *kamang* and *jubata* of the Kanayatn, this is a composite spirit category, recognized throughout southeast Borneo, which besides such transformed ancestors includes a multitude of variously animal- and human-like guardian spirits of the local village and forest environment, a group of upperworld spirits, and some ancient beings preceding mankind. Like them they represent a particularly powerful type of beings, and those *nayyuq* that originate as people were notably all powerful people. Some people in the past are also believed to have become *nayyuq* directly, that is, without undergoing a process of deliberate ritual transformation, or to have "disappeared" without dying, turning into a category of invisible people classified as *gaib*.

Transformed ancestors are an important category of ancestral agencies in several Borneo societies including the Iban and Uut Danum discussed in this volume. Often, as in these two societies, these spirits, which are ontologically distinct from ordinary spirits of the dead, become spirit-animals, in which case they may manifest themselves to people in their animal form. In some early references to this phenomenon, which is frequently associated with a taboo for the ancestor's descendants to eat animals of the species into which the ancestor is transformed, it was understood as an expression of totemism (e.g., Evans 1923: 40, Hose and McDougall 1912, II: 96; cf. also Schärer's interpretation of the manifestation of the dual Ngaju godhead in these terms). Béguet gives several contemporary examples of Iban ancestors believed to

have turned into pythons, a form in which the *nayuuq* also commonly appear. Other forms reported by Béguet or Sather for the Iban include other snakes, crocodiles, deer, mouse deer, tiger cats, and the mythical *nabau* watersnake. Such beings often enter into a personal relationship as spirit helpers (*tua*) with one or several of the descendants of the ancestors from whom they originate, providing protection and prosperity. Like dead shamans, they also sometimes become spirit familiars (*yang*) of Iban shamans in ritual, as does another type of spirits that people sometimes turn into, the *antu gerasi*, or giant forest demons (although these beings are generally more dangerous than helpful).

Béguet describes metamorphosis as a major mechanism whereby some Iban dead become ancestral spirit helpers among the living, and more generally, as a principal passageway between the domains of visible and invisible beings. In her analysis, all or most of the so-called Iban gods, or *petara*, a term which she takes to refer to any benevolent invisible agency that supports people in some field of prestige-generating activities, including the omen birds and the mythical spirit heroes (*Orang Panggau*), ultimately originate as ancestors, either recent or distant. Metamorphosis, in her view, represents a process of spontaneous or accidental transformation occurring outside ritual that is radically different from the regulated process of ritual transformation of *semangat* and *antu*, established in the cycle of mortuary rituals, which has the effect of separating the dead from the living. She understands it as a generative principle of spiritual differentiation of an animistic ontology whereby seen and unseen beings continually shift form or develop into new agencies.

Among the Uut Danum analyzed by Couderc, ancestors also sometimes take the form of watersnakes (*Lobahta*). Like the *nayuuq*, *kamang*, and *jubata* – and indeed, the *petara* – this is another example of a composite spirit category including “original” (non-human) watersnakes, who represent regularly propitiated territorial guardian spirits capable of providing fertility and general well-being. In addition to watersnakes, the oral history of the Uut Danum, like that of their closely related Ngaju neighbors (see Schärer 1963), also report mythical hawks (*atang/antang*) as another manifestation of transformed ancestors, and like the Bentian, the Uut Danum recognize that some ancestors became transformed without dying into a distinct class of invisible people (*gaip*).

Another category of immortal ancestral Uut Danum beings is the early mythological ancestors who founded local groups (*uhtus*). Originating as

superhuman upperworld beings (*uLun Langit*), they underwent a kind of reverse transformation by descending to earth and marrying, thereupon engendering human descendants and descent lines, membership in which is expressed through adherence to inherited taboos. They, and other ancestors, also established village offerings sites in the forest (*tojahan*) associated with a resident tutelary spirit (*koLunon tojahan*) which acts as a mediator in ritual contacts with powerful spirits, including the *Lobahta*. This is a being which, Couderc argues, metonymically represents the founder, an “ancestral spirit” in Tannenbaum’s and Kammerer’s sense of a “nonancestor spirit associated with the ancestors” (2003b: 4). Such tutelary spirits are often propitiated in what they call “Southeast Asian founders’ cults,” which, as they observe, typically merge powerful local spirits, founding ancestors, ancestor spirits (the spirits of the founders or other ancestors), and ancestral spirits (2003b: 4). Another type of “ancestral spirit” in this understanding of the word recognized by the Uut Danum is *avin*, a personal, non-ancestor guardian-spirit which receives food offerings in ritual and sometimes outlives its human associates and provides protection to its descendants.⁷

In Uut Danum religion and ritual, then, it is not the spirits of the dead (*Liow*) – which for them predominantly symbolize the negative aspect of death – but different categories of transformed ancestors or “ancestral spirits” that represent the most influential ancestral agencies and sources of a life-generating potency. As we have seen, this constellation is different in some other Borneo societies (i.e., the Iban, Bentian, and Benuaq) in which spirits of the dead also act in the latter capacity, although in complementarity with transformed ancestors and other representatives of composite spirit categories. (The Kanayatn represents an intermediate case in that only a selected minority of their spirits of the dead do so, and mainly in a capacity as mediators with the *kamang* and *jubata*.) This difference reflects a stricter symbolic association among the Uut Danum of death with its debilitating aspect, and of mortuary rituals with the sphere of death, and a converse propensity to associate potency exclusively with life and even immortality, expressed by the fact that the influential ancestral agencies recognized by them are seen to have undergone neither death nor mortuary rituals (unlike, for instance, the Iban transformed ancestors that are typically transformed after death).

Two Types of Bornean Ancestral Spirits

Over and beyond these differences, however, these cases point to the common existence in Borneo societies of two distinct types of spirit agencies

representing ancestors in the realm of the spirit world. First, ancestor spirits emerging from among the spirits of the dead in mortuary rituals, and second, transformed ancestors, immortal mythological ancestors, and ancestral spirits, that either come into being through special post-mortuary installation rituals or processes occurring outside of ritual, or originate from outside the local social domain. These categories roughly correspond to two globally widespread types of ancestors identified by Mary Helms (1998: 34–54), which she refers to, respectively, as “emergent” or “house” ancestors, and “first-principle” or “creator” ancestors.

An important contrast between these two types of ancestors is that the first category is symbolically associated with the local society or social unit from which its representatives emerge, whereas the second category, whose representatives merge with or emerge from autochthonous or primordial forces outside it, is ambiguously associated with the encompassing natural and cosmic environment by which local society is preceded in time and surrounded in space.

The first category is characteristic of sedentary societies with social units (such as Houses or lineages) characterized by an orientation toward “self-containment” in respect to achieving spiritual regeneration and social reproduction, whereas the other is especially common – and typically represent the principal exemplary predecessors – in hunter-gatherer societies with immediate-return economies, shallow genealogical memories, and a “worldview based on the consubstantiality of life” (1998: 34), entailing an ontological continuum between society’s and nature’s beings. But as Helms notes, both categories frequently coexist (1998: 39) – especially in bilateral and weakly sedentary societies (1998: 190, fn. 4) – in which case they typically complement each other in enabling spiritual regeneration and social reproduction, achieved through invocation of forces originating both within and beyond the more or less self-contained and self-constituting local social domain.

Parallel or complementary relations with both categories are in fact typical throughout the Indo-Malaysian region and consistent with a tendency described by Reimar Schefold as a “twofold ritual dependence upon supernatural blessings, one stemming from the realm of the genealogical ancestors, the other from the uncultivated regions surrounding the world of the living, which conceal the hidden domain of autochthonous spirits” (1994: 815). Throughout the region human well-being is perceived to be contingent upon maintaining relations with unseen agencies representing these realms,

a perception which may ultimately come down to an axiomatic Austronesian conception that respect is due, and vitality or potency obtainable from, agencies that stand in a constitutive or originating relationship to society or its members, a quality shared by important predecessors in the local social and larger natural and cosmic realm.

A common feature of the second category of ancestors associated with primordial origins and autochthonous non-human forces, which is widely encountered in Borneo and beyond, is that relations with them are often initiated through marriage (Helms 1998: 40, Schefold 2001: 365), or through other alliances such as blood-pacts and adoptions. Among the Uut Danum, for instance, transformed and *gaip* ancestors often marry female watersnakes of the underworld, while apical ancestors, who typically were immortal celestial beings originally, married human women and settled in their earthly societies where they transmitted taboos and cultural rules to human beings. For another example from this volume, in a myth recounted by Helliwell the founding ancestor of a Gerai "hearth group" climbs to the sky and marries a deity who on his return to earth provides him with valuables and the knowledge of *adat*. Among the Iban, culture heroes, such as Siu, Pulang Gana and Simpang Impang, often married, or were adopted by, daughters of under- or upperworld gods from whom they received charms and cultural knowledge (McKinley 1976: 106, Sather 1994). In central Borneo, a prominent example of such an affinally-connected culture hero is the celestial tiger-spirit (Sellato 1983).

A common characteristic of these "affinal ancestors" – expressive, like their affinal status, of their ambiguous association with a domain that is external to or encompasses local society – is that relations with them characteristically have a contractual character (Helms 1998: 40). Exemplified by the system of *hajat* vows of the Uut Danum, which illustrate a *do ut des* type of ritual relations, this contractual character is often established through a covenant whereby the descendants agree to respect certain rules or taboos which, if broken, terminate the relationship with their ancestor and its associated benefits. A peculiar and widespread case of such covenants in Borneo is the pacts of mutual non-aggression between humans and crocodiles (e.g., Evans 1923: 76–78, Hardeland 1859: 25, Hose and McDougall 1912, II: 76, 81–82, 110–111, Kershaw 2000: 65, Metcalf 1982: 188). The origin of these pacts is often traced to an alliance of blood-brotherhood between a particular ancestor and a crocodile, or to the transformation of an ancestor into a crocodile. Even when created through the ancestor's metamorphosis, however, it seems more appropriate to describe such relationships between

men and crocodiles (or their watersnakes counterparts among the upriver Uut Danum) in affinal rather than in descent terms. As Couderc argues in this volume, relations with the so-called “totemic” ancestors in the early Borneo literature form a special modality of a widespread pattern of alliance with spirits of the outside world in which the ancestor shifts his ontological status to himself become the constitutive Other.

Material Representations of Ancestors

Ancestors are not only represented through conceptions of unseen agencies in the spirit world. They are also manifested in observable reality through material representations. Material representations of ancestors are an important vehicle whereby their significance as ancestral spirits is reproduced and their presence made tangible. They are also a fundamentally important means of expression and transmission of the ideational heritage of the ancestors, as well as of group identity.

There is a diversity of material representations of ancestors in Borneo. Some, like the anthropomorphic *pantak* effigies of the Kanayatn, the ancestor skulls of the Dayaks of southeast Borneo, and the *tojahan* shrines of the Uut Danum, iconically or metonymically represent particular ancestors and facilitate acquisition of potency from agencies associated with them. They are thus also objects of worship, or at least sites of worship, mediating contact with ancestors or other spirits associated with them. Others, like the commonly found funerary posts used by all groups practicing secondary mortuary ritual, usually neither directly represent the ancestors, nor primarily serve to enable ritual contacts with them, but are principally meant to commemorate and express reverence for them (although the Punan Bah *kelireng*, and indeed other examples as well, also symbolize a notion of the regeneration of life through their sexual iconographic imagery). Some material representations, like the collective bone ossuaries in south Borneo or the objects constituting a ritual hearth among the Geraï analyzed by Helliwell in this volume, or the *longan* house altar of the Bentian and Benuaq, do not represent any particular ancestors, but nevertheless serve to connect living people to each other and to important dead predecessors. Yet others function primarily as signs of the ancestors, as temporary vehicles of communication (such as termite nests or beehives appearing on graves or bone repositories: see Béguet, this volume, Schiller 2002: 23). A special type of material representations of ancestors is the animals in which transformed ancestors are perceived to become embodied.

There is generally in Borneo a strong association between supernatural forces and some real or imagined corporeal forms associated with them, and this applies to spirits of the dead as well. The spirits of the dead may eventually become independent of their former bodily containers, but this typically takes a long time – often, as Hertz observed, roughly corresponding to the time it takes for the flesh to decompose and become detached from the bones. However, frequently, as Metcalf notes for Berawan eschatology (1982: 243), “The metaphorical link between the material and immaterial existence of the individual is too strongly made ever to be quite extinguished.” This is to say, as Metcalf observes, that spirits of the dead, including those that become benevolent ancestral agencies, tend not to be exclusively associated with some unseen otherworldly realm or existence, but retain, at least ambiguously, a connection with the bodily remains, objects, and places that are associated with the people from whom they originate. In other words, they often maintain a perceived presence in this world, associated with places and objects that had a connection with them, or that start to have one after death as a result of revelatory experiences by their descendants. This is especially clear in the Berawan case in which ancestor spirits are frequently addressed with requests for well-being at temporarily erected outdoor “prayer stations” (*tapo*) in places in nature near their former residences (Metcalf 1989). But as several contributions to this volume illustrate, ancestors in many Borneo societies are quite often called back from the afterworld – or never go there in the first place – to become personal-guardian spirits accompanying individuals, or family or community spirits present in houses or elsewhere in people’s surroundings. Thus, the ancestors do not only exercise an influence in the capacity as an otherworldly community from a distanced afterworld. Apart from being accessible for ritual communication in specific locations, they also often appear unbidden in people’s lives, such as through the involuntary possession experiences recounted by Payne in his chapter. Intimately felt encounters with ancestors in the everyday world manifested through apparent signs or unexplainable occurrences (e.g., strange sounds and appearances of flies), analyzed by Appleton in her phenomenological analysis of Melanau ancestorship, are an important form of interaction with the ancestors through which their significance is reproduced. According to Appleton, knowledge about the ancestors is “accessed experientially” and “anchored in concrete rather than abstract reference points.” As this suggests, ancestors in Borneo characteristically tend to retain a strong presence in the immanent world of the living, a presence which to an important extent

is represented by sensorily perceived material phenomena, as James Siegel (1983) argues for odors and images in Javanese practices surrounding death.

An important form of material representations of ancestors is the body, and, especially, the bones. Contacts with and perceptions of the more or less recent dead, in particular – who may not be ancestors – are to an important degree mediated by them, as well as by the edifices and sites where they are placed. However, it is noteworthy that bone ossuaries and graves relatively rarely function as sources of potency from the ancestors, or other dead (although there exist exceptions pertaining to both types of objects, see Perham in Roth 1968, I: 211, Richards 1981: 321, Schärer 1963: 148, Schiller 1997: 38). This reflects a dominant symbolic association of these objects with the afterworld – the ossuaries especially *are* indeed primarily representations of the residence of the dead in it – and with the debilitating aspect of death which must be overcome for life to go on and society to recuperate. This association explains a reported impotence of the ancestors as a source of vitality necessitating a complementary acquisition of potency from other sources in some societies where it is strongly stressed such as the Uut Danum, and the Merina of Madagascar (Bloch 1985). However, as Couderc explains in his chapter, bone ossuaries, especially the collective instances of them in the south, nevertheless symbolize a highly valued social ideal, namely, the integrity and continuity of the family group placed in them.

However, in some Borneo societies the bones of the dead do represent sources of a life-generating potency. The most vivid example of this is probably the practices involving the ancestor skulls in southeast Borneo, which apparently used to be more widely distributed in the past. However, the acquisition of potency from these skulls requires special ritual treatment during and after secondary mortuary rituals, including exhumation followed by separation of them from other bones stored in family ossuaries, and subsequent ritual installation in special outdoor mausoleums or in the rafters of houses. Additionally, maintenance of their potency thereafter requires regular ritual attention involving, in particular, offerings of food and blood lustration during major rituals performed for community well-being. These practices together realize a radical conversion of these “dead” bones into life-giving ritual objects, and their recontextualization from the sphere of mortuary rituals to the sphere of life rituals. At the same time, the fact that the skulls are mostly those of prominent community members suggests that the ultimate origination of their potency is from the potency

manifested by these people already in life. Such potency is also what motivates the special postmortuary treatment of the remains of selected Iban deceased in the form of “entombment” in coffins on raised platforms (Sather this volume, Uchibori 1984).

The pelvic bones of Punan Bah aristocrats represent another form of potent bone relics in Borneo, one that constitutes, however, a kind of “hybrid category,” in that their utilization is limited to the context of mortuary rituals while they nevertheless form an important source of life-renewing vitality. During reburial rites particular care is taken to cleanse and dispose of these bones (placed in the above-mentioned *kelireng* burial posts), which are considered to contain the sexual potency of the deceased, so as to enable the rebirth of the soul of the deceased and the sexual reproduction of the community (Nicolaisen 2003).

Stones, often symbols of an enduring, immortalized influence, are another important category of material representations of the ancestors in Borneo, which often point beyond the ancestors in their symbolic associations. They range from small, portable stone charms – used as ritual equipment or for personal protection – that are picked up on graves of newly buried deceased or inherited from particular ancestors along family lines, to huge natural boulders believed to represent petrified ancestors or entire longhouses, and high mountain peaks which all over Borneo are associated with the deeds of mythological ancestors or culture heroes. Of intermediary size are the often imposing megaliths erected in connection with secondary burials to commemorate prominent deceased in some central north Borneo societies (e.g., Bulan 2003), and the smaller, roughly head-sized stones (*batu tuloi/tuluy*) that are anointed with blood and have a prominent role as fertility symbols in the headhunting rites of some central Borneo societies (Whittier 1973: 187, Rousseau 1998: 50). This book illustrates the significance of stones, and wooden effigies representing ancestors, through two types of offering sites which combine them among the Kanayatn and the Uut Danum, sites which form the focus of ritual practices that were taken as an expression of a Bornean cult of the ancestors in the earlier ethnographic literature (Mallinckrodt 1928).

Padagi are sacred places located in the forest comprising wooden figures (*pantak*) and erect stones (*panyugu*), whose role as sources of ancestral potency and assistance in the Dayak–Madurese conflicts in the late 1990s is discussed by Oesterheld. They have a double symbolic and ritual significance by connecting the communities using them simultaneously to certain

prominent genealogical ancestors, and to nature and upperworld spirits, illustrating the typical pattern of complementary acquisition of potency from these two sources of originative influence emerging from within or outside local society. According to an early description by Schadée, stones were erected in the *padagi* when an oath was made with its tutelary spirit, the *Kamang Trio* (or *Tariu*), which is also the patron of headhunters (1908: 108). The link with the genealogical ancestors is represented by the *pantak* figures, which are erected for deceased of high social status.

The Uut Danum *tojahan*, which feature one or several stones surrounded by an often large number of small and crudely carved anthropomorphic effigies made of wood, display the same basic ritual and symbolic functions, albeit with slightly different cultural emphases differentially expressed by their constituent stone and wooden components. While the Kanayatn *pantak* are nominally associated with the individual ancestors for whom they were built (and whom they indeed iconically depict, according to Schadée 1931: 12), the effigies of the *tojahan* represent them in a collective and anonymous guise (cf. Schärer 1963: 149) – a common mode of representing ancestors by anthropomorphic effigies in Borneo. On the other hand, the stones that form part of this shrine, especially the stone around which the shrine is originally established, are in this case more directly associated with the genealogical ancestors, particularly the founder of the shrine. Through stories of its foundation, the stone carries the memory of the founder of the *tojahan*, and often more concretely links it to his physical existence in the material world, by being regarded as the transformation of an object or animal linked with the ancestor, or even as his own petrified head or another body part.

Such symbolic representation of ancestors and, in particular, community founders by stones also characterizes other village offering places in south Borneo (Mallinckrodt 1923, 1928), as well as the above-mentioned ancestral stones (*batu tuloi*) that are kept in sacred enclosures outside longhouses (and the leader's apartment) in central Borneo, where they, like their Berawan *bító' tилоi* counterparts (Metcalf 1989: 78–79), are interspersed with anthropomorphic effigies and ritually important plants (*Cordyline* sp., which are grown in the offering sites in the south, too). These round stones, some of which are considered by the Kenyah to be gifts from the spirits of ancestors (*bali tepon*), are the exclusive property of great aristocrats who through them can trace their ancestry back to apical ancestors who themselves bore “stone names,” and in some cases originated from stones (Elshout 1926: 181, 231, Tillema 1989: 208; cf. Mallinckrodt 1928, I: 71).

There is thus a continuum between the ancestor skulls of the Bentian and Benuaq, the ancestral effigies of the Kanayatn and Uut Danum, and the sacred stones of these and other Dayak groups mentioned. These objects all represent the ancestors through iconic or metonymic reference to their bodily existences. Another essential characteristic shared by these objects is their ambiguous association with ancestor spirits. There are few instances of community shrines mediating ritual relations with ancestor spirits in a direct or exclusive way, in accordance with Sellato's claim that *kramat* sites in Borneo mostly pertain to cults of the place rather than to cults of particular ancestors (2002: 11). However, an example of such direct interaction with an ancestor spirit associated with an object representing him is provided by the Benuaq *nalitn tautn* ritual described by Payne, which involves a sequence of possessions by the spirit of a recently deceased forebear who is placated by the installation of his skull. Another example is the ceremony performed at the *pantak* of the famous ancestral warrior Ne' Rake described by Oesterheld, during which the spirit of this ancestor was directly invoked to provide assistance in warfare.

But as these examples also indicate, ancestor spirits, whether contacted at community shrines, such as the *padagi* and *tojahan*, or elsewhere, most prominently act as *intermediaries* in contacts with other categories of spirits, especially nature spirits, with which they often become integrated or merged. Consistent with these observations, the *padagi* has been described as an offering place dedicated to the *kamang*, a category of spirits including forest spirits, blood-thirsty, animal-like spirits, and the spirits of bachelors who did not come back from war, with which the deceased merge upon the transfer of their *pantak* to the *padagi* (Schadée 1904: 539–540, 1931: 13, Oesterheld this volume). Similarly, the spirits of deceased Bentian and Benuaq individuals whose skulls are installed at the *longan* house altar become transformed into or replaced by *naiyu* spirits, another example of an ambiguously ancestral spirit. In the same vein, the *tajahan* of the Ngaju has been reported to conflate the ancestors with the tutelary hawk-spirit (Schärer 1963: 149). Even the tombs where “enshrined” Iban spirits are contacted suggest, by their location on the summit of hills and other distinctive places in the forest (Uchibori 1984: 18), a transformation of these spirits or their association with spirits of the natural environment.

In addition to the effigies that form part of the *padagi* and *tojahan* shrines, another form of wooden object discussed in this book is the Bentian and Benuaq *longan* house altar. Like the *padagi* and *tojahan*, this

object, whose ritual and social significance is explored in the chapters by Payne and Sillander, also features anthropomorphic figures in the form of its crudely carved legs. It indeed forms something of an indoor version of these forest shrines, and like them expresses an ambiguous association with ancestral founders and non-ancestor ancestral spirits – expressed through the complementary dialectics of wood and stone in the two former cases – and again highlights the central role of ancestors and ancestral objects as mediators with the spirit and natural world. Contributing to its pertinence and potency in this regard, the *longan* holds on top of its legs a small shelf on which are placed recognizably potent charms (pearls, tongue-shaped stones, tiger teeth, strangely formed pieces of wood, etc.), which have been inherited from the ancestors or revealed by them to their descendants in dreams. It is made of ironwood, a material symbolizing and enabling its durability, and an enduring general connection with the ancestors, as well as a more specific link of ancestry with predecessor houses from which it has typically been moved. It is thus also an important vehicle of social integration, both in this symbolic respect, and by constituting a ritual center during house and community rituals when otherwise largely dispersed swidden-cultivating kin groups and village communities gather. This is notably an important aspect of most of the earlier-mentioned shrines and objects as well, pointing to a characteristic lack of differentiation between worldly and religious functions of these material representations.⁸

Symbolic and Ideological Representations of Ancestors

So far we have mainly been concerned with the ritual and religious significance of the ancestors, although the previous section on material representations of ancestors has shown that they also have a far-reaching social and symbolic significance, which does not just reflect their presence in the unseen world or spiritual landscape of the living. This is even more true for the ideational heritage of the ancestors – encompassing knowledge, traditions, values, rights, and taboos – which in Borneo societies manifests the ancestors prominently in what might be termed their “ideological landscapes,” and plays a major role in shaping their members’ social relations and way of life. The significance of this aspect of ancestral influence is largely secular, being predominantly invoked in discourse outside ritual, and pertains less to relations between people and spirits than between people. Although often sanctioned by religious ideas about forces and conditions in the unseen world, it rarely concerns, and it does not presuppose the

existence of, ancestor spirits. It reflects principally the existence and perceived influence of ancestors as formerly living people of the past, and it is principally symbolic as opposed to instrumental, in that it expresses the value of the ancestors rather than invokes their agency. However, the significance of ancestors in this respect is far-reaching in Borneo, including among Christians who no longer perform rituals concerned with ancestor spirits or spirits of the dead, or maintain traditional religious beliefs about them, implying that ancestorship in Borneo cannot be reduced to ancestor worship in a narrow, religious sense.

In most Borneo societies, the ancestors are an important source of moral authority. This is to say that the values and practices that are associated with them represent a model for correct or virtuous conduct. These values and practices are largely objectified and codified as “tradition,” a concept usually designated by the word *adat* (or *adet*), which besides designating tradition in a broad sense also more restrictively refers to customary law. One of the most widespread forms of respect expressed for the ancestors in Borneo is that which is attributed to them for having initiated or handed down *adat*, and other elementary cultural institutions such as rice cultivation. Often, as among the Iban, Benuaq, Gerai, and Melanau in this volume, it is the early mythological ancestors – which, as Payne notes for the Benuaq, are attributed greater respect than later ones due to their higher position on a scale of precedence – that are credited as founders of cultural institutions in Borneo. But as noted by Appleton in her chapter, less distant apical ancestors are also sometimes regarded as the founders of the *adat* of particular village groups, which in the past were generally more autonomous and had a less unified *adat* than today.

As a source of moral authority, the ancestors are not just invoked indirectly through reference to *adat*. They are also frequently referenced directly in this capacity, such as to legitimize various conditions, actions, or ideals that may with some plausibility be attributed to them. In such cases they are commonly invoked, as reported for the Bentian, Melanau, Iban, and Uut Danum in this volume, as an anonymous totality, a usage that Sillander proposes reflects the ancestors’ close symbolic association with “society.” As he observes for the Bentian, the ancestors are often prominently associated with a generalized moral ideology prescribing relation-affirming behavior and integration particularly between inclusively defined kinsmen. This is the case also with the Melanau. Appleton analyzes the Melanau concept of *tipou*, used by them to designate grandparents and ancestors, which

she proposes represents a “root paradigm” in Victor Turner’s sense. She states that this culturally central concept “not only has a conceptual core of genealogical connection but that its use is also associated with what might be described as a ‘drive’ for genealogical connection that is primarily a drive for integration.”

When invoked as an anonymous totality in discourse, the ancestors are often more specifically addressed, as among the Bentian and in many others cases, as “elders who came before” (*ulun tuha one*; cf. Iban *tuai ke dulu*, Uut Danum *uLun oko’ Lomoy*), an expression which testifies to their association with authority, and a position as predecessors or seniors – on which their authority is largely based. As Sillander argues, relations with ancestors in Borneo have to be understood within the overall system of relations between juniors and seniors in society. The authority of the ancestors is sustained by – and itself helps to sustain – a generalized social ideology of seniority according to which elders and predecessors should hold authority and take responsibility over their juniors and successors and for this reason be shown respect. An expression of this deep-seated and regionally widespread ideology, which also underpins the generational kinship system, is the fact that it is typically the living elders that are most inclined to invoke the ancestors’ authority. In the Bentian case, the elders are also seen as the “voice of the ancestors,” a proposition substantiated by their propensity to use a formal speech code characterized by parallelism and other poetic attributes which is associated with the ancestors (as in some eastern Indonesian societies it is thus seen that the ancestors “spoke in pairs”: see Fox 1974). The effect of this is a symbiosis between elders and ancestors, reinforced by the emergence of the latter from the ranks of the former, who form the principal prospective ancestors in society (see Appleton, Sillander this volume).

Another frequently invoked aspect of the ideational heritage of the ancestors, through which their significance as a moral authority is reproduced, is myth. In many Borneo societies, there exists an extensive corpus of myths that tell about the mythological ancestors’ exploits and how they created cultural institutions, or of how particular *adat* rules, ritual practices, or features of the local natural landscape came into being (see Couderc, Sather, Sillander, this volume). As sources of moral authority, myths characteristically do not represent ancestors simply as flawless incarnations of morality, but frequently also as rather quotidian characters with human limitations and desires, making and learning by mistakes. At the same time, they often depict them as in some ways significantly different from present-day people,

as constituting ideals whose deeds are in some ways unattainable, and hence all the more authoritative. Among other things, they convey a picture of the ancestors as endowed with superhuman powers and an ability to cross the boundaries between the visible and invisible worlds, reflecting the idea that the events recounted often took place in a primeval period when heaven and earth were not yet separated, and humans and other beings not fully differentiated.

In addition to invoking the ancestors as a source of moral authority, references to them in discourse also fulfill other purposes. Among other things, references to ancestors may serve to procure or maintain various concrete prerogatives or rights, or social status or prestige, as well as to establish the identity of individuals and groups. In such cases it is typically individual ancestors that are invoked, often certain prominent and exemplary community members, but sometimes also moderately significant personal forebears. As in other parts of the world, the fact of being descended from a particular ancestor often enables people to lay claim to bilaterally defined rights to farmland, forest resources, and property such as heirlooms.

In many Borneo societies, including the Iban, Bentian, and Melanau discussed in this volume, lengthy genealogies are often kept and written down in notebooks. They serve to connect people both to proximate forebears who, for example, opened up particular tracts of land for cultivation, and to more distant founders or other prestigious past members of local groups, as well as to remote mythological heroes including ambiguously human and godly characters. Genealogical descent, even though extended for many purposes to collateral relatives, indeed matters in many Borneo societies, and there even exists in some societies a “descent group ideology” (Bloch 1971), according to which membership in some groups, such as bone ossuary-holding estates, should be restrictively based on descent, and only true kin may really be trusted (see, e.g., Schiller 1997). The Iban, who trace genealogies of up to thirty or more generations, acknowledge a special category of “memory specialists,” and in this case keeping genealogies expresses a pervasive competitive orientation, as well as an ambition to remember and celebrate the names and personal achievements of ancestors. As a result of achievement-graded commemoration of the deceased during the festival for the dead, their reputation is even perceived to live on in the afterworld (see Sather, this volume).

This points to the fact that references to ancestors serve to achieve not only social integration but also social differentiation, an objective which

is particularly important in the stratified societies of Borneo in which the nobility practice endogamy, and unlike commoners often preserve remarkably long genealogies (Okushima 2006, Rousseau 1990). But as the Iban case demonstrates, descent may fulfill this purpose up to a point despite a strong egalitarian ethos and an absence of social strata, and it sometimes has a restricted importance, in this respect limited to some domains of society without becoming an all-encompassing social concern. In the relatively egalitarian societies of south Borneo, for example, being descended from a former leader or shaman is today as in the past an influential factor should one choose to pursue a career in either domain, and there are numerous examples of leadership and shamanship having passed down family lines.

While genealogies and individual descent from ancestors play an important role in many Borneo societies, this is not the case with the Gerai of West Kalimantan, analyzed by Helliwell in this volume. According to her, ancestry in this conventional sense has only a very limited significance among them, and this also goes for ancestorship in the sense of relations with spirits of the dead and other ancestral agencies, which are not maintained beyond the mortuary ritual. However, one particular type of collective ancestry plays a central role in organizing social relations in Gerai society, and in providing spiritual and legal protection against the malicious influence of both spirits and people. As Helliwell explains, this ancestry organizes groups within what Fox influentially has coined “origin structures,” a cover term for a diversity of distinctive Austronesian social formations that order groups in precedence relationships through their links of derivation from their social or ultimate cosmological origins (e.g., Fox 1995).

This collective ancestry pertains to what Helliwell describes as “the most important type of grouping in the community,” the “rice group,” which consists of one to two residential units that share responsibility for the cultivation of rice. Through this group’s affiliation with a ritually consecrated hearth in a village dwelling, it becomes connected with a similar group from which the hearth was broken off – through formal inheritance of a set of objects associated with this group’s hearth: a “guardian hearth stone,” some ash that had been kept in it, a rice storage jar, seeds of glutinous and ordinary hill rice and of a specific plant (*jungkal*), and a pair of gold earrings – and through this group it then becomes connected to *its* predecessors, and ultimately to the mythological ancestors and some associated sky deities from whom *adat* was received as a gift, and thus to the origins of *adat* itself. In this way this association – which provides another example of the importance of material

mediation for Borneo ancestorship – also brings the rice group under the authority of *adat*, in addition to establishing it as an independent rice group that assumes guardianship over its own ritual hearth. Since affiliation with a ritual hearth is necessary to obtain the legal and spiritual protection of *adat*, this forces some groups, which do not have the financial means to establish hearth guardianship, to affiliate as inferior “hangers-on” to others who do, demonstrating how this particular “origin structure” operates as a source of social authority and prestige in society, and establishes a degree of hierarchy within this generally egalitarian society. Besides by the objects associated with the ritual hearth, a rice group’s relationship with it is expressed also by descent taboos (*mali keturun*, mainly food taboos) – another influential manifestation of the ideational heritage of the ancestors (see also Appleton and Couderc, this volume) – which like these objects have passed down from predecessor hearths over the generations.

This example draws attention to the fact that ancestors, in this case those who collectively constituted a hearth-affiliated rice group, and particularly one person among them recognized as the hearth’s guardian and “root” (*bungkung*), often provide a source of collective identity in Borneo. A significant finding of this volume is that ancestors have a constitutive significance for groups in this respect on several levels, in addition to being important for social reproduction more generally (e.g., by constituting a moral authority) – even though Borneo societies are not organized in descent groups based on lineal descent from particular ancestors. There are many ways in which direct or indirect connection with ancestors serves to enable group identity, and, consistent with the inclusive ways in which ancestry is often conceived, those constituted as a group or recognizing a common identity based on connection to one or several ancestors do not need to consist of descendants in a strict sense. A well-known example on the household level is the Iban *bilek*, or longhouse compartment family group, which like its remarkably similar Gerai counterpart recognizes ancestry and continuity from predecessor entities symbolized by inherited material objects (sacred rice strains, ritual whetstones, a “source house post,” heirlooms), and acknowledges a custodian, known, in accordance with a regionally widespread botanical idiom, as its “trunk” or “source” (*pun*). Material objects associated with particular ancestors or ancestor groups indeed play a prominent, mediating role in constituting groups through reference to the ancestors, such as the *longan* house altar of the Bentian or the Uut Danum *tojahan* forest shrine, in these cases on the House and village levels.

Ancestors are thus a powerful source of identity in Borneo, characteristically conceived of inclusively. Particularly in contexts where solidarity is stressed, it is common to invoke ancestry from ancestors that are very remote, and not strictly genealogical. Exemplifying this tendency, Uut Danum mortuary rituals draw during their progression guests from increasingly larger social units (from households – to villages – to inhabitants of entire river basins), and the participants stress their common ancestry from more and more remote ancestors, starting from close forebears for whom the rites are performed, and ending with apical ancestors of sub-ethnic groups, mythological founders and culture heroes. Similarly, in the annual Berawan “prayers of the house” (Metcalf 2010: 232), the invocation of different leaders of the past, in turn named and unnamed, in a series of prayer sessions throws into relief the capacity of references to ancestors to integrate – and differentiate – on different levels the collectivities which constitute the ethnically mixed longhouse communities of the Berawan.⁹

Today this mechanism increasingly operates also on a larger scale, in the context of the development of ethnic consciousness on the local, regional, and, especially since the 1990s, inter-regional level (see van Klinken 2002). As an example of this development, reflecting the increasing integration of the Dayaks within the Indonesian and Malaysian nation-states, Appleton discusses in her contribution how legendary apical ancestors who formerly principally represented the ancestors of particular village groups recently have been enrolled to represent a collective Melanau past in efforts to develop tourism and promote a sense of common Melanau ethnic identity.

Oosterheld, in his discussion of the Dayak–Madurese conflict in West and Central Kalimantan, illustrates a case in which ancestors were used as an ideological weapon with dreadful consequences in terms of Madurese fatalities. In the discourses of Dayak political elites, which according to many observers were instrumental in inducing the emergence of this conflict, especially in Central Kalimantan, notions of “Dayak ancestors” and “Dayak ancestral territory” served both to represent the condition of increasing marginalization and victimization of the Dayak peoples during the Suharto regime, and to build a cultural and political awareness to counteract it. In these discourses, ancestors represented a moral authority embodying the wrongs done to the Dayak people, which were presented as a sacrilege of ancestral tradition. Revenge was then committed in the name of ancestors, and, contrary to the traditional Bornean pattern of “non-interference” whereby ancestors rarely themselves avenge breaches of ancestral tradition,

even attributed to their own agency. Under various guises, ancestor spirits were represented by participants and commentators as having played a direct, active role in assisting the Dayak combatants in the battle.

Oesterheld draws attention to the vagueness of the terms that were applied in this indigenous political rhetoric to describe the involvement of the ancestors in the warfare. In official speeches given during purification ceremonies performed at certain Ngaju shrines in Central Kalimantan at the end of fighting, the Indonesian language terms (*leluhur*, *nenek moyang*), which were systematically used to refer to the ancestors in this context, were applied indiscriminately to categories of community guardian spirits (e.g., *antang patahu*, *sahur*) (see Smith 2005: 20), even though these, as we have seen, are much more ambiguously ancestral beings than suggested by these terms designating ancestors or forebears in a strict sense. At the same time, as Oesterheld shows in his detailed account of some crucial episodes of the conflict when it spread from West to Central Kalimantan in 2001, these ancestral spirits became a “common asset” of Dayaks in both provinces. As an example of such an episode, he discusses how Kanayatn shamans from West Kalimantan were invited to perform their traditional rituals to summon ancestral spirits for the benefit of their Ngaju “brothers,” who now had started their own war against the Madurese people in Central Kalimantan. As Oesterheld observes, through such events and others, involving inter-provincial Dayak interaction, the Dayak–Madurese conflict reinforced evolving sentiments of a pan-Dayak identity based on the sharing of common “*leluhur Dayak*.”

Notes

1 In this context, it may be relevant to refer also to the ancestor-based rights of the Bidayuh and other Borneo societies (Geddes 1954) that establish cultivation rights to a particular tract of land for all descendants of the person who first cleared it, although these descendants usually constitute descent *categories* rather than groups in a strict sociological sense.

2 For references to these and other terms used to refer to ancestors in Borneo, see Appleton, Béguet, Couderc, Helliwell, Sather, Sillander, this volume, Elshout (1926: 157), Evans (1923: 76), Hose and McDougall (1912, I: 81), Geddes (1954: 29), Guerreiro (1992: 25), Janowski (2007: 100), Lindell (2003: 318), Metcalf (1989: 61), Nicolaisen (1998: 367, 377, personal communication 2010), Rousseau (1978: 91, 1998: 109), Sellato (2002: 4), Whittier (1978: 113). Some of these terms (e.g., Baluy

Kayan *sepun*, Kenyah *tepon*, and Punan Bah *asien*) notably carry the additional connotation of “originators.”

3 Schärer’s language exhibits here a striking similarity to Robert Hertz’s in his essay on the collective representation of death (published in 1907), although he makes no reference to him in his publications.

4 A revealing illustration of such a taken-for-granted role of ancestors as upholders of morality, suggesting influence on these writers of a classic anthropological understanding of ancestor worship, is found in an article written by a Dutch military officer about the millenarian *nyuli* movement that spread in southeast Borneo in the early twentieth century (Feuilletau de Bruyn 1934). Quoting the respected Dutch explorer Nieuwenhuis to illustrate the notion of misfortune resulting from extramarital pregnancy among the Bahau, the author states that such a misdeed is punished by the spirits of the ancestors (1934: 52, fn. 16). In fact, however, the quoted passage in *Quer Durch Borneo*, Nieuwenhuis’s *magnum opus* (1904–07, I: 61), only mentions the role of “the spirits” (*die Geister*) in this respect, and there are no indications in the rest of the book that the term “spirits” refers specifically to ancestor spirits nor that the latter play such a punitive role in that or other contexts.

5 However, see Dunselman (1949–50: 333), who reports that Kendayan spirits of long dead ancestors receive offerings during rice rituals for the sake of representing custodians of *adat* practices, and Payne, this volume, who gives evidence that Benuaq ancestor spirits may punish disrespect for elders.

6 This notably calls into question Max Gluckmann’s (1937) proposition that complex eschatological beliefs correlate negatively with ancestor worship. Complex eschatologies are clearly not any less characteristic of those Borneo societies that recognize and maintain ritual relations with ancestor spirits than of those who do not.

7 There are many examples of such personal protecting or guardian spirits in Borneo which are either inherited “ancestral spirits” (such as the above-mentioned, or the *rusod* of the Rungus Dusun) or true ancestor spirits (e.g., the Bentian/Benuaq *kelelungan*) and such spirits appear indeed to be generally more important in Borneo religions as sources of ancestral potency than *mana*-like substantive forms (e.g., Appell and Appell 2003, Nicolaisen 2003). Spirit action was notably also identified as an important source of potency in Southeast Asia by Rodney Needham (1976: 76, 80, 87, fn. 10), who insightfully, although perhaps too categorically, dismissed mechanistically conceived conceptions of substantive potency in Borneo and beyond as ethnographic fiction.

8 The maintenance of a symbolic link with communal shrines of origin villages by people who have moved out is reported for many Borneo societies. It takes several forms, including transfer of the shrine itself, or of its constituent stones, and the replanting of one of the plants grown in it (Elshout 1926: 229, Mallinckrodt 1923: 545, Metcalf 2010: 229, Schärer 1963: 148). Among present-day Uut Danum, main-

tenance of such a link is sometimes achieved through a return to the *tojahan* of the origin village to perform rituals in fulfillment of vows there.

9 In a new book published too late for full consideration in this volume, Peter Metcalf (2010) presents a sophisticated model of the integrative role of ritual on “different levels of inclusion and exclusion” in Berawan longhouse society – the longhouse community, the longhouse apartment, the individual – variously activated through different rituals such as the “prayers of the house,” during which each longhouse apartment is successively guest and host to all the others. All longhouse rituals, he argues, shift constantly between these levels, “assembling community at one moment and creating individuality in the next” (2010: 232, 236). This book offers an important contribution to the study of ancestorship in Borneo that complements Metcalf’s previous findings on the central importance of ancestors in Berawan rituals (1982, 1989). By illustrating the pivotal role of longhouse leaders in migrations, long-distance precolonial trading networks and secondary mortuary rituals, it shows how longhouses were concretely “the embodiment of ancestors” (2010: 310), and how the memory of past leaders profoundly shaped their oral history and social morphology. It also suggests that the principal way that mortuary rituals affected the process of becoming an ancestor in Berawan society was not through the transubstantiation of the spirits of the dead but through the action of *living* leaders who commissioned the construction of mausoleums and mobilized the community to support the festival for the dead, during which the latter were celebrated as ancestors. Thus making oneself an “impresario of the ancestors” was directly instrumental to becoming one in the future (2010: 253).

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CHAPTER 1

Ancestors as Sources of Authority and Potency among the Bentian of East Kalimantan

Kenneth Sillander

IN AN ARTICLE IN A recent anthology on ancestors in Indonesia, Bernard Sellato argues that a “cult of the ancestors” is rare in Borneo. He claims that “Only a few groups of western Borneo may indeed have ancestors, in a stricter sense” (2002a: 15). In this article, he also laments the indiscriminate use of the word “ancestor” for dead forebears, including references to the dead as an anonymous collectivity (2002a: 1–2, 13–14). In contrast to such usage, he suggests that ancestors represent “a selected few among the multitude of ordinary dead forebears,” more precisely, such people for whom “a special rite” establishing them as ancestors has been held (2002a: 14). In addition, he argues to the effect of restricting the concept to such forebears who are distinguished by extraordinary deeds and serve as references for society.

In this chapter, I propose that the Bentian of southeast Borneo, like other Luangan Dayaks, have ancestors, even in the relatively narrow sense defined by Sellato.¹ Moreover, I argue that they have something coming close to an ancestor cult, since ancestors are regularly contacted and seen as authoritative agencies capable of influencing events. I will demonstrate the importance of Bentian ancestors by describing the different manifestations of the Bentian dead, and the ritual and extra-ritual contexts in which they are invoked. A second purpose is to discuss why ancestors are important in Bentian religion: what are the sociological and cosmological factors inducing contacts with and references to them?

Sellato’s article has the merits of discouraging careless use of the ancestor concept and highlighting some critical characteristics of ancestorship. Compared to Sellato, however, I adopt a wider definition of the ancestor

concept. There are several reasons for this. First, a narrow definition can, as Steadman et al. (1996) argue, be detrimental for an understanding of religious behavior, and could, in the present case, impede an understanding of the structural and political significance of the dead. Second, the boundary between Bentian ancestors and other dead is diffuse: famous ancestors stand metonymically for the rest, and when ancestors are collectively addressed it is often particular representatives that are primarily connoted. Third, when the dead are invoked it is frequently – and especially when they are collectively invoked – in a capacity as authoritative agencies capable of bestowing well-being upon the living, or worthy of respect because of their fundamental importance for society. In other words, they are invoked in a capacity as ancestors. Finally, I use the word “ancestors” to translate the often used Bentian term *ulun tuha one*, which designates ancestors precisely in the sense of authoritative and influential predecessors (although it may be used also in a broader sense encompassing all people of the past).

The literal meaning of *ulun tuha one* is “elders who came before,” or “elders of the past.” The dead people referred to with this term are indeed in a structurally similar position to elders. Consequently, Bentian ancestorship can be understood as a form of “eldership,” somewhat as Kopytoff (1971) argues African ancestorship can. Like elders, ancestors are a source of guidance and authority and an object of respect and gratitude for what they have done.

In my understanding, ancestors are respected dead, who, like living elders, hold authority over, and are regarded as capable of influencing, the living, and who are regularly contacted for those reasons. Ancestors need not be singled out, however, and a certain anonymity is indeed characteristic of them. Furthermore, they include dead people who have no, or an insufficiently known, genealogical connection to ego. These conditions are consistent with the social organization, and the fact that old and respected people may serve as elders (*tuha, puun*) even when they have no genealogical descendants.

This is not to say that all dead people are ancestors, however. The recently dead are not yet ancestors, and would not typically be included among the *ulun tuha one*. For one thing, they are not yet “of the past.” But they are also predominantly malevolent and typically not capable (at least not in ritual) of providing much service for the living. However, they may appear in dreams and give general advice or information about potent objects, for example. And as we shall see, proper ritual treatment also entails the transformation

of at least one aspect of all the dead into ancestors – by merging them with the anonymous collectivity of heavenly *kelelungan* spirits. At the same time, differential ritual treatment also singles out some Bentian dead from the rest. However, ancestral status is not merely or necessarily a function of ritual. Rather, it is the social importance of the dead as a whole, and of some particular dead in particular, which earns them their position as ancestors. In addition, death itself increases the imagined power of the ancestors.

In the first place, death attributes certain extraordinary qualities to the dead: they become *gaib*, “invisible” and “magical” (cf. Kopytoff 1971: 133). Death removes, as it were, some of the restrictions placed upon the living by their physical existence, and enables a connection with the unseen world through the deceased who is ambiguously part of that and this world (cf. Bowen 1984). In addition, death makes available the potency of those who die for the living. Death unleashes, as it were, the powers or vitality of people – and animals. Death does not simply terminate something. There is usually some kind of transformation of the life-force taking place upon death. Thus, for example, the soul of a living person is transformed upon death into a soul of the dead, and if the deceased’s soul was strong when he lived, it will likely be strong when he dies. Death is not only beneficial for the living, however. It is also debilitating, for instance, when relatives die. Besides grief, it may then provoke a state of “heat” (*layeng lihang*), entailing listlessness and vulnerability to attack from malevolent spirit beings, including “ghosts” (*wok*) associated with corpses. Indeed, death is always, regardless of whom or what dies, potentially debilitating (for which reason precautions have to be taken when animals are sacrificed). But it can also be empowering, and with proper care taken it can be treated so as to be so with greater probability. There are in this respect what could be called two sides of death, a good and a bad. In this scheme, the ancestors represent the former, or what could be glossed as its “regenerative” aspect, and they are a principal source of potency in society, as well as a principal medium for social reproduction.

Bentian Notions of Souls and Ancestor Spirits

The Bentian make an interesting object for a Hertzian analysis of death in terms of correspondences between the condition of the corpse, the state of the soul of the dead, the state of the mourners, and the performance of different stages of mortuary ritual. Bentians believe that there are two distinct souls or spirits associated with a dead person (even with very

small children, who nevertheless may not require ritual treatment), which figuratively represent and express concerns about the good and the bad side of death. Living people, on the other hand, are typically believed to have just one soul, called *juus* (variable notions of multiple souls exist but are generally vague and less important).² Notions of the *juus* resemble notions of the soul in other Austronesian societies. It is normally lodged somewhere in the body, although it may temporarily leave it during illness, as a result of being stolen by spirits, or as a reaction to fright or shock, as well as during dreams, which represent its nightly wanderings. Curing rituals basically serve to restore health by returning the *juus* to the patient's body (through the head). Illness is also said to result from soul weakness (*lome juus*), and health, vitality, and potency, in turn, are described in terms of soul strength or soul hardness (*tokeng juus*). Soul strength is regarded as a quality that can be acquired; small children have weak, or soft, souls, powerful people (leaders and ritual experts) strong ones. Soul strength can be acquired through gradual exposure to conditions which are dangerous for the soul or through the performance of rituals or other meritorious actions. Special ritual procedures involving the use of iron or the reception of payment also increase soul strength. A strong soul is a sign of the potency of the person with which it is associated. But soul strength is also a metaphor for social standing and sociality. In a basic sense, it reflects an affirmation of social relations or relations with spirits, whereas soul weakness reflects an alienation or a lack of social integration, or the breach of relations (cf. Tsing 1993: 191).

The two spirits of the dead consist of *liau*, associated with the deceased's body and bones, and *kelelungan*, associated with the deceased's head and skull. These spirits are believed to come into existence upon death, at the same time as the *juus* ceases to exist.³ *Liau* is generally described as bad (*daat*), and *kelelungan* as good (*bue*) or clean (*lio*). A principal reason for this is that *kelelungan*, unlike *liau*, can become a protecting spirit (*pengiring*), whereas *liau* cannot, and that *liau* is more likely to cause harm to people. Beyond these differing propensities of *liau* and *kelelungan*, another reason for their contrary characterization is that they function as symbols of life and death, respectively, or the side of death which is relevant for the continuation of life, and that which is antithetical to it. Indicating this, *liau* is associated with the number seven, an important symbol of death, adversity, incompleteness, and death rituals, while *kelelungan* is associated with the number eight, a symbol of life, luck, completeness, and life rituals (*belian*).⁴ Consistent with

this portrayal of it as uncongenial to life, *liau* is also to an extent characterized by predilections and modes of perception inverse to those of the living. A further contrast between the two spirits is that *liau*'s afterworld consists of a village situated on a mountain on earth – Mount Lumut, located in the mythologically important upper Teweh area a couple of days walk from the Bentian area – while *kelelungan*'s is a village in heaven, Tenangkai.⁵

Both *liau* and *kelelungan* are believed to resemble people in their outward appearance, and both commonly appear in dreams. Dreams of dead relatives are interpreted as being about *kelelungan* if the deceased appears clearly and speaks, and as about *liau* if the deceased is unable to speak, has an hazy appearance or is only seen from the side or behind (*ditan lituk bongkeng*). Life in the afterworld generally resembles life in this world, in both cases. Water buffaloes, pigs, and chickens sacrificed during the secondary mortuary ritual (*gombok*) are said to be reared by them there, and the bone repositories (*temla, keriring*) constructed during elaborate *gomboks* involving exhumation represent their houses in these locations. The more plentiful the sacrifices, and the grander the ritual, the more pleasant will the souls' life in the afterworlds be, and the more sympathetic to the living are they expected to be.

Notions of two oppositionally-defined souls or spirits of the dead resembling *liau* and *kelelungan* are found also in other societies (e.g., Freedman 1967: 86, Geirnaert 2002: 36–37; note also the distinction between the *ayu* and *bungai* aspects of the Iban “plant-image,” Sather 2001: 58–65, and this volume). This distinction may express basic human concerns of widespread pertinence. To some extent it probably reflects what Metcalf (1982: 235, 243) termed the “inherent bilocality of the dead,” that is, their ambiguous association with a typically remote afterworld (often located in heaven), on the one hand, and the grave and the land where they used to live, on the other, an ambiguity reflecting the ambivalent relationship of the soul with the body, being both associated with and separable from it. The *liau/kelelungan* distinction may indeed partly reflect this logic; the more malevolent and essentially useless *liau* being associated with the body, its animation, and earth, and the more benevolent *kelelungan* with the head, the so-called higher human capacities, and heaven. However, more importantly it represents the two-sided significance of death – simultaneously debilitating and (potentially) revitalizing – and two widely employed and studied strategies of responding to it: separation and regeneration (see Bloch and Parry 1982, Hertz 1960).⁶ How *liau* and *kelelungan* represent these strategies is illustrated by their treatment in Bentian mortuary ritual.

The Treatment of the Dead in the Secondary Mortuary Ritual

The generic term for Bentian secondary mortuary rituals is *gombok*. These rituals quite closely resemble – but are not identical to – those of their Benuaq neighbors.⁷ As among them, there are different hierarchical levels of mortuary ritual, varying in terms of duration (from 3 to 21 days), expenditures (e.g., regarding whether they demand sacrifice of water buffalo or only pigs and chicken), and whether or not they involve exhumation of the deceased's remains. Only a minority of the Bentian dead undergo *gombok mpe selimat*, secondary mortuary ritual with exhumation, which usually, being an especially costly ritual, involves several deceased at once. If the financial means are available, the *gombok* may be carried out shortly after death. However, it is normally performed one or several years later, and this is always so with *gomboks* involving exhumation, which, having been preceded by lesser *gomboks*, indeed usually represent *tertiary* mortuary rituals.

The most commonly stated purposes of the *gombok* are to “treat” (*melian*) *liau* and *kelelungan*, and guide them to their respective afterworldly abodes. Before its performance, *liau* and *kelelungan* are believed to hover about the place where the deceased lived, or alternatively to go back and forth between it and their afterworldly locations. At this time they are generally miserable and malevolent – particularly the *liau* – and likely to cause trouble for their relatives, for example by capturing their souls or disturbing them in their sleep. As among other peoples practicing secondary mortuary rituals, they are assumed to long for their relatives and companions, and to be jealous over the fact that they remain alive while they are dead (Coville 2002: 79, Metcalf 1982: 103–104). They are also assumed to be more or less unhappy because of the fact that the *gombok* has not been arranged for them. This is something which the living owe them, as a token of gratitude and veneration for what the dead did for them, and “paying back” (*bales*) this debt is indeed a major stated objective of the *gombok*. Among Kaharingan Bentians, the *gombok* is compulsory rather than optional, and its performance is a requirement for lifting the taboos on widow/widower remarriage and the division of the deceased's estate (see also Hertz 1960: 39, 122, Weinstock 1983: 56).⁸ Burial (*ngelubeng*), or the brief primary mortuary ceremonies carried out shortly after death, are not sufficient to facilitate a permanent transition to, and provide the dead with an acceptable existence in, the afterworld.

But even the *gombok* is not necessarily sufficient in all respects. *Liau* and *kelelungan* may – in negation of Hertz's view (1960: 56, 61, 136) – continue to be dissatisfied, and indulge in soul theft, long after it (e.g., because of a desire for a more elaborate *gombok* to be arranged for them). Indeed, curing rituals featuring soul searches to the abodes of the *liau* and *kelelungan* are common, and *buntang* extended family and *nalin taun* community rituals usually include this program activity, preceded by *besemah*, “ceremonial presentation of respect and offerings,” as a standard measure aimed to forestall the dead's dissatisfaction and malevolence. A “hot,” debilitating state associated with death may also persist after the *gombok*, prompting the relatives to arrange a special ritual (*buntang moas utas*) to terminate this state.⁹

Thus the secondary rite may not conclusively end the living's relations with the deceased. Indeed, the *gombok* does not sever relations with the dead in all respects. In the first place, a large number of *liau* and *kelelungan* (all mentioned by name) of previously dead relatives of the deceased are invited to partake of food and entertainment provided during the ritual, and to accompany the deceased's two souls on their journeys to Mount Lumut and Tenangkai (led by the ritual experts, the *wara*, and a number of dead *wara*, early ancestral heroes, and animal spirits, serving as their *mulung*, “spirit helpers”). It is seen that the living act as hosts for the dead during the ritual. Indeed, every *gombok* represents a temporary reunion of the living with the dead somewhat like the *gawai antu* ritual does for the Iban community once in a generation (e.g., see Sather 2003). As in this case (Sather 1993: 98), or the Ngaju *tiwah* (Schiller 2002: 23), assistance from the dead beyond tasks relating to the ritual itself is also asked for during the ritual. More precisely, well-being, prosperity, large harvests, etc., are requested from the *kelelungan* collectivity into which the *kelelungan* of the deceased enters when reaching Tenangkai, after having first been bathed and purified (*kelelio*) in the Pool of Heaven (Betun Loyun Langit),¹⁰ and subsequently, upon reaching Bawon Penyenteau, a high vantage point from where it can see Tenangkai and envision its future existence, having become entreated to promise to act as a protecting spirit for the living from here on.

In this regard, *kelelungan* is treated rather differently than *liau*. Similar favors are generally not asked from the *liau*, who is instead mainly addressed by requests not to harass the living. Thus, in so far as the *gombok* is concerned with separating the dead from the living, which is indeed a major purpose of the ritual, it primarily pertains to the *liau*. For example, in various ritualized

games played during the ritual, the community or party of the living (*mio*) is counterposed to that of the *liau*, and it is understood that the living will prosper and be left undisturbed by the *liau* if the *liau* lose, and, conversely, that misfortune and death will ensue for the living if the *liau* win (the living always win these predetermined games). The *liau* of the newly deceased is also more ceremoniously taken farewell of and care is taken to inform it that it will not return after the journey on which it sets out. Significantly, the *liau*'s journey to the afterworld is more arduous and takes a longer time. It is also much more ritualized: *en route* to Mount Lumut the entourage of ritual experts, their human and animal spirit helpers, and the previously dead relatives of the deceased stops in many places where the *liau* engages in various forms of play (*gege liau*), which are enacted by the *wara* or the ritual participants and serve to entertain the *liau* of the deceased (and the living audience) and to provide it with further provisions (symbolically acquired through these activities), in order to enable it to live content in the afterworld.

The Ritual Significance of Ancestor Spirits beyond the Mortuary Ritual

Thus, the secondary mortuary ritual in some respects serves to overcome death and enable the living to leave it behind by means of establishing a separation between the living and the dead, at the same time as it serves to promote a successful continuation of life *by means of* contacts with the dead, particularly in their guise as *kelelungan*. With these heavenly beings, who may be said to represent the dead in a purified state, reduced to such qualities as are desired from them, further contacts are desired and maintained after the ritual. For instance, during multi-purpose collective rituals (*buntang, nalin taun*), they are addressed and receive cooked meat offerings together with the celestial *seniang*, the most god-like and authoritative of all spirits recognized by the Bentian, and fertility, prosperity, and well-being are then requested from them. During these and other rituals (e.g., curing and harvest rituals), they are also "presented respect and offerings" (*besemah*), and addressed with similar requests alongside various other spirits (e.g., *naiyu, timang, juata*) in a capacity as protecting spirits (*pengiring*). I was told that the *kelelungan* can exert influence in this connection by way of, for example, entering the rice paste (*burei*) with which the participants in such rituals are anointed.



Figure 1.1. *Belian* shamans invoking protecting spirits during *makan utek* ("feeding the ancestor skulls"). To the left, offerings and small jar containing animal teeth and other ancestral objects on top of a box of ancestor skulls.

The *kelelungan* thus represent a principal Bentian category of protecting spirits, attributed with a capacity to protect and promote the well-being of the living, a form of influence that they wield by descending to earth when required. In addition, whenever life or mortuary rituals are performed, the *kelelungan* of dead life and death ritual officiants (*belian* and *wara*, respectively) function as spirit helpers (*mulung*) of their living counterparts, helping them, for example, to catch lost souls, fight malevolent spirits, or, during the *gombok*, guide the dead to the afterworld.¹¹ Indeed, the *kelelungan* spirits of dead ritual experts represent, together with various early mythological ancestors, the principal spirit helpers of Bentian shamans. This is another important field and prominent capacity in which they act as beneficiaries for the living among the Bentian, and together with their role as protecting spirits it represents another example of how this category of spirits of the dead continue to have a desired, principally beneficent, ritual significance long after death, a consideration already in itself sufficient to warrant use of the term "ancestor" for them.¹²

The most salient manifestation of an ancestral cult among the Bentian dead is possibly not the relationship that the living maintain with the

heavenly *kelelungan*, however, but their relationship with the ancestor skulls (*utek tuha*) and the spirits associated with them. These spirits originate as a category of selected representatives of *kelelungan* who in a special ritual (a *buntang* or *nalin taun*) are asked to come down from heaven and become protecting spirits associated with the skulls of the people from whom they originate. These are skulls which have previously been exhumed during an elective *gombok mpe selimat* and which now are brought to the house in order to become permanently stored there in a capacity as ancestor skulls. Like some heirlooms (gongs, jars, etc.) and odd objects (e.g., tiger and clouded leopard teeth, small wooden figurines, strangely formed pieces of wood or stone, pearls), inherited from the ancestors or pointed out by them in dreams, these skulls are endowed with magical power or potency (*kekuasaan*, Indonesian, *pengewasa*), and together with them form the object of regular ritual attention whenever *buntang* or *nalin taun* rituals are held. During these rituals, and occasionally at other times, the skulls (or more precisely, the wooden box in which typically a number of them are stored)¹³ and the ancestral objects are anointed with blood, and receive small offerings of food with expectations that protection and blessing



Figure 1.2. *Ngulas* ("blood lustration"). Anointing ancestral objects of the kind that are kept on the *longan*, including large feline and bear teeth, stones, and unidentified object believed to represent a spirit tongue.

will be received in exchange (see Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). The ancestor skulls are especially important in this respect if they are stored by the *longan teluyen*, a permanent “altar” made of ironwood which used to form, and sometimes still forms, the ritual center of Bentian multi-family houses (*lou*) and village longhouses (*lou solai*).

The *longan* is a roughly two meters tall, somewhat ungainly cone-shaped construction consisting of some four to eight anthropomorphically carved poles (depicting *naiyu* spirits) which are connected at the base and lean outwards as they reach higher (see Figure 1.3). The poles hold up a small shelf on which the small, potent objects inherited from the ancestors are stored, and the ancestor skulls are typically stored in a box in the rafters just above the *longan*. When the skulls are thus stored near the *longan* they are referred to as *utek tuha longan*, “ancestor or elder skulls of the *longan*,” and together with the *longan*, which used to be moved when new multi-family houses replacing their predecessors were built, they symbolize the continuity and unity of the house groups or communities associated with them (Sillander 2002).

Some ancestor skulls and some of the above-mentioned ancestral objects (particularly tiger and clouded leopard canine teeth, *belin timang*) also serve a special function as *penyentuhu*. In this capacity, they, or rather the spirits associated with them, oversee and perform particular tasks during the proceedings of customary law (*adat*), and as such they form an important possession of the elders who administrate it (Sillander 2004: 285–286). Among the Bentian’s Benuaq neighbors, the skulls also have a conspicuous function in *kwangkai* secondary mortuary rituals, in which they represent the invited *kelelungan* guests and are held by participants when they participate in *ngerangkau* dancing, a salient activity in these rituals (and the Bentian *gombok*), which is performed for the entertainment of, and together with, the invited spirits of the dead (e.g., see Bonoh 1984–85: 36). Possibly, the ancestor skulls may also have other ritual or extra-ritual functions of which I am unaware, and their ritual significance was likely greater in the past.¹⁴ In the 1990s, Kaharingan Bentians were reluctant to talk about these skulls and their relationship with them, out of fear of appearing primitive or as not following a proper religion (*agama*), and because of an uneasiness to talk about matters relating to death.

As already indicated, not all Bentians are, or were, exhumed, and not all the skulls of those exhumed are kept in the house (most of them are kept, as among other Dayaks practicing secondary funeral rites, outside in the ironwood bone repositories erected during the ritual). A great proportion of

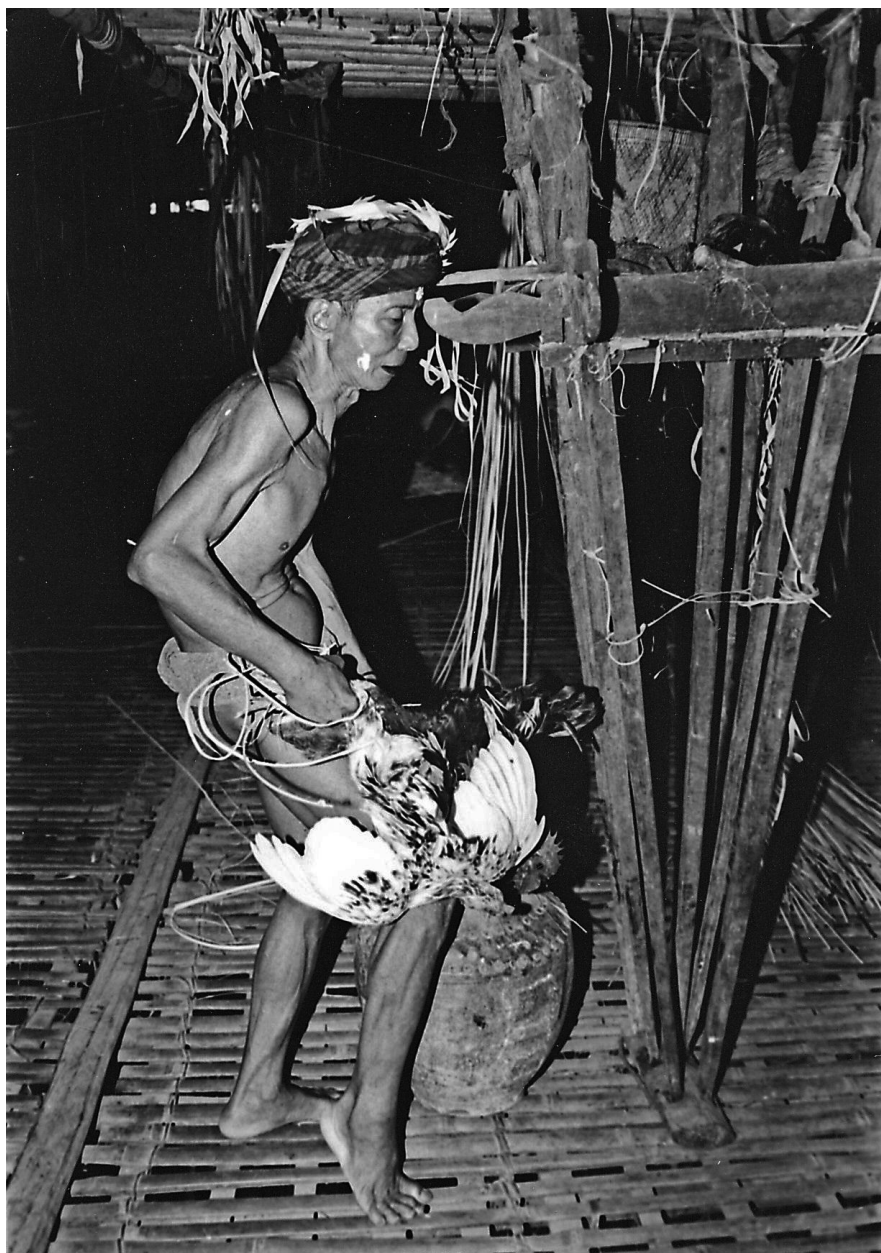


Figure 1.3. *Belian* shaman dancing, devoting offerings to protecting spirits at the *longan*.

those that receive exhumation and, in particular, of those whose skulls are stored in the house, are people who enjoyed high status in life, and who

were influential in the capacity as elders (*tuha*), leaders, *adat* administrators (*manti*), ritual experts (*belian*, *wara*), or warriors (*pemanuk*). What we are dealing with here is ancestors in a relatively strict sense of the term, that is, people who acquired status and potency during life, and who became an object of reverence, a reference for society, and a source of favors after death. Indeed, the fact that potency, and respect, is attributed to their remains is, at least partly, a result of this; the remains of those not regarded as potent during life are not regarded as equally potent, and are, in the first place, much less likely to undergo special treatment enabling them to become sources of potency. However, it is also, in part, a result of the ritual treatment that they received; first, during secondary mortuary rituals when *kelelungan* became part of the heavenly *kelelungan* collectivity, and the remains were exhumed, and second, during the *buntang* or *nalin taun* ritual when the skulls were brought to the house, and third, during subsequent curing, harvest, and community rituals, when the skulls are fed and anointed with blood, an activity said to have the capacity to impart *naiyu* spirits to them, and make them potent.

Skulls and Potency

The custom of bringing the skulls of certain ancestors to the house was noted also by Hertz (1960: 57, 136), who reported evidence of this practice from several southern Borneo societies (Tunjung, Ma'anyan, and Lawangan). Even though he stressed that the "final [mortuary] ceremony . . . is not intended for the adoration or propitiation of deified souls," he simultaneously noted that it "is susceptible of becoming the starting-point of a cult" (1960: 136), and that "it needs only a development or crystallization of these beliefs and these feelings . . . [i.e., which are felt toward the dead and their remains *after* the ceremony] for a proper cult of relics to be established" (1960: 57). Beliefs and practices relating to *pangantoho*, a word designating ancestor skulls and other objects pointed out by the dead among Bentian-related peoples in the Barito region (Lawangan, Taboyan, Dusun) were described in some detail by Te Wechel (1915) and Mallinckrodt (1927, 1974). These beliefs and practices formed the basis for Mallinckrodt's proposition of an existence of an ancestral cult among the Lawangan, which represented, in his view, a formerly more widespread, original element of southern Borneo Dayak religion, which had been preserved to a unusually high degree among the Lawangan, a condition which made them more susceptible than

other Dayaks to the early twentieth-century millenarian *nyuli* movement which postulated the return of the ancestors (Mallinckrodt 1974). Many early references from all over southeast Borneo indeed testify to a special ritual significance of the skulls of the dead in this area (e.g., Bangert 1860: 155, Grabowsky 1888: 583, Hartmann in Leupe 1864: 386, Nüsselein 1905: 541, Schulte 1917: 381–383, Tromp 1888: 76; see also Sarwoto 1963: 27–28, Weinstock 1983: 124–125, for two more recent references). This means that one cannot simply ignore Mallinckrodt's thesis, even though he seems to have simplified Lawangan beliefs and probably exaggerated the importance of the ancestral element in their religion (see Sillander 2004: 225).

A clarification of the beliefs and practices surrounding ancestor skulls is complicated by two factors, which demonstrate that they are vehicles of multiple motivations. In the first place, it is mostly, *but not exclusively*, the skulls of people of high status that are brought to the house. In the second place, the skulls are *ambiguously associated* with both *kelelungan* and *naiyu* spirits.

Even though the ancestor skulls, as often noted in the literature, frequently belong to more or less renowned ancestors, the skulls of unremarkable people are also sometimes kept. For example, an old man that I knew stored the skulls of his parents, his first wife, and his present wife's sister, all of whom were rather unexceptional, and quite poor, in the rafters of his multi-family house. It seems that people for various reasons (e.g., love, illness, dreams) often feel obliged to honor their dead relatives even if they were not so remarkable (even unremarkable forebears are often highly respected). In fact, the decision to exhume or bring to the house the remains of someone probably only rarely *primarily* reflects a desire to obtain potency, even though it may serve to install the deceased as a protecting spirit in response to wishes expressed by him in his relatives' dreams. Instead, paying back and demonstrating the value of the dead represents the principal motivation for these practices. This holds true even in respect to the remarkable dead, who are specially treated primarily because of the greater obligations that one has toward them, reflecting their greater accomplishments and the greater services provided by them during life, and the greater danger potentially following from not fulfilling these obligations, reflecting the greater strength of their souls (*juus*, as well as *liau* and *kelelungan*), and the more powerful protecting spirits associated with them during life, and after death. As this suggests, demonstrating the value of the dead is an important incentive for maintaining and, especially, for initiating contacts with them,

and is thus an important factor enabling ancestor worship (i.e., the means at disposal for demonstrating the value of the dead enable an acquisition of potency from or through them at a later stage). In addition, this objective is, as in areas such as interior Sulawesi where overtly competitive mortuary ceremonies are performed, compounded with an objective (typically covert in the Bentian case) “to generate and sustain honor” for the living relatives (Coville 2002: 75). Whatever their eschatological significance, a major function of mortuary rituals – and relations with the ancestors – is obviously to communicate something about past and present social relations.

An important consideration regarding the ancestral skulls of the Lawangan and Dusun noted by Te Wechel (1915: 20, 109) was that it was actually not the soul of the dead (*adiau*, *liau*) that occupied or was given offerings at them, but a protecting spirit (*Schutzgeist*) that would enter the skull as soon as the dead had left it. What he referred to here was *njanjo*, known among the Bentian as *naiyu*. The *naiyu* are the principal protecting spirits of the Bentian – more important than the *kelelungan* – and individuals, multi-family houses (*lou*), and villages are believed to be guarded by particular *naiyu*. Among the Bentian, too, the *naiyu* are associated with the ancestral skulls, as well as with the ancestral objects, certain house posts, and the *longan teluyen* (which lodges *naiyu* that act as house or community protecting spirits) – and it is largely because of this association that these objects are regarded as potent. A prominent characteristic of the *naiyu* is their desire for blood, and the ritual lustration of the ancestral objects with blood (*ngulas*) is said to be what attracts *naiyu* to them. This is true also for the “headhunt skull” (*utek layau*), another ritually-anointed potent object, which is regarded to be inhabited by *naiyu* not only because of this practice but also because of the original bloodshed associated with its acquisition.

The *naiyu* are a heterogeneous category of spirits that most frequently appear in human form, but sometimes also as animals (e.g., as certain large house lizards, pangolins, and huge aquatic pythons).¹⁵ Some are ancient beings that preceded mankind, while others originate from people. Some reside in different parts of the sky while others live down on earth. Among the latter, some are, as we know, associated with houses and specific ritual objects, while others represent guardian spirits of specific places in nature (mountaintops, headwaters, waterfalls, etc.) where potency and strong souls could be acquired through “meditation” (*betapa*) by the ancestors (*ulun tuha one*). The *naiyu* are thus not only a source of protection, but also a principal source of potency in society. In fact, the *naiyu* – whose voice thunder is said

to be – are intimately associated with potency, so much that, if an object or person is potent, it can be said to “have *naiyu*” (*naan naiyu*) even though it would be unknown exactly what kind of spiritual agency was associated with it. In a sense, the *naiyu* are potency, and it is largely around them that the Bentian discourse on potency revolves.

The fact that the soul of the deceased’s skull, as described by Te Wechel, is replaced by the *njanjo* (*naiyu*) could perhaps be taken to indicate that the ritual practices involving the skulls constitute, not an ancestor cult, but a cult of *naiyu*. Indeed, it is among the Bentian principally the *naiyu* that are explicitly addressed at the skulls during *buntang* rituals in connection with *makan utek* (“feeding the ancestor skulls”) and *ngulas* (“blood lustration,” the anointing of the ancestor skulls, ancestral objects, *longan*, etc., with blood from the sacrificed animals). However, it is simultaneously believed that the *kelelungan* reside by and can be contacted through them, at least for the duration of rituals (informants disagreed about whether *kelelungan* would leave their heavenly abode when the skulls are brought to the house, or continue staying there and descend only when required). I was also told that the practice of keeping these skulls represents a gesture of respect toward the deceased, and that the skulls symbolize the *kelelungan* – while the *longan* symbolizes the *naiyu*, and the tiger and clouded leopard teeth kept on its shelf symbolize the feline *timang* spirits.

As this indicates, the skulls indeed *represent* the ancestors, and they are usually brought to the house upon explicit requests *by the deceased* – expressed in relatives’ dreams – to become protecting spirits. Ancestors and skulls are thus associated despite the latter’s association with *naiyu*. Indeed, a dominant interpretation of what happens upon installment of *kelelungan* as a protecting spirit is that it *becomes a naiyu*. This is in fact requested from the *kelelungan* in ritual chants, both in the *gombok*, when *kelelungan* reaches Bawon Penyenteau, and in the *buntang* or *nalin taun* ritual when the skull, during *pesengket*, is placed on an upside-down-turned shield, and brought into the house together with the celestial *naiyu* (see also Payne, this volume). According to this interpretation, the *naiyu* of the ancestor skulls represent a kind of metamorphosed ancestors. A similar interpretation comes from the Ma’anyan, for whom Hudson (1972: 98–99, 131) reports that *nanyu*’ is a term for an ancestor who returns to the world of the living and takes up residence in a special spirit house stored in the rafters of a multi-family house (*lewu*) from where it provides protection in exchange for food offered during the post-harvest spirit propitiation ritual.¹⁶ This Ma’anyan spirit house bears an

obvious resemblance to the Bentian *longan*. Both are associated with returned, ambiguously ancestral, ancestors that are addressed with similar requests for protection and well-being during rather similar rituals, and both are moved and reinstalled when the houses where they are stored are rebuilt or relocated.¹⁷

Clearly, there is among both Luangans and Ma'anyans a close association – if not a perfect identity – between ancestors and the spirits referred to as *naiyu* or *nanyu* (or *njanjo*). This is borne out not only by the ambiguous identity of the agencies associated with the ancestor skulls, but also by the fact that ancestral objects and objects associated with *naiyu* tend to merge over time: the former typically have *naiyu*, and the latter are likely to be inherited and become ancestral objects. Obviously, the potency derived from the Bentian ancestor skulls, however designated, *originates* from the ancestors, indicating that the ancestors are the ultimate source of much of the potency sought in ritual (including that sought from the ancestral objects). The facts that the skulls of some people, demonstrably potent during life, are regarded as particularly potent, and that it is usually these skulls which are assigned a place by a *longan*, while the skulls of unremarkable ancestors are not widely recognized as potent (or necessarily associated with *naiyu*), and often not exhumed at all, also testifies to this, showing that the *naiyu* do not appear automatically, but *as a consequence* of what the ancestors did – or what was done to them. It is seen that ancestors, particularly potent ones, can be transformed into a source of potency, especially, but not exclusively, if their souls and remains undergo special ritual treatment.

One example of such transformation, which demonstrates that ritual treatment is not always decisive, consists of reports that some ancestors “became *naiyu*” (*jadi naiyu*) or some other sort of spirit, *directly*, without passing through a phase as heavenly *kelelungan* or *kelelungan* associated with the ancestor skulls in between. Petono, for example, is a *naiyu* offered black sticky rice and chicken blood in bamboo offerings trays (*ansak*) suspended from the central roof beam of upriver Bentian and upper Teweh river houses, who originated as a man who became angry when people ate his rice and consequently disappeared by “entering ironwood,” and therefore hereafter must be appeased through rice offerings. Jarung, an ambiguously identified *naiyu* or *seniang* spirit called down from heaven to oversee water buffalo sacrifice, is another example. Some early ancestors are said to have “ascended to heaven,” and thus to have become spirits, while others are said to have escaped death and become invisible and mystical (super)human beings (*gaib*) on earth. The latter, we may note, represent a third form of ancestor spirits

(distinct from *liau* and *kelelungan*) who are important in the capacity as spirit familiars in rituals. These beings, who include the early mythological heroes, either reside in various heavenly locations or in unseen ancestral villages in the central area and purported ancestral homeland of the Luangan, from where they are fetched by the ritual experts when needs arise.

Among the Bentian, it is, in fact, not just a number of individual ancestors that became spirits. According to Bentian mythology, nearly all spirits, with the exception of some ancient superhuman beings believed to have preceded humanity,¹⁸ ultimately originate from human beings. This applies, for example, to the above-mentioned celestial *seniang* – who in addition to god-like beings regulating *adat*, fate, and the natural cycles, etc., also include the stars – who originate from the miscarried fetuses resulting from the incestuous union of the first man and his daughter (see Schärer 1966: 62–106 on similar origins of the Ngaju *sangiang*, and Sather 1994 on the deformed mythological ancestor Simpang Impang).¹⁹ This is also, to mention another example, the case with the heavenly *pali* spirits who oversee and punish the transgression of taboos (*pali*) by descending to earth to capture souls.

In fact, like much Southeast Asian mythology (e.g., Endicott 1970, Gibson 1986, Smedahl 1989), the Bentian origin myths (*tempuun*), which are recited over several days in larger collective rituals (*gombok*, *buntang*, *nalín taun*), postulate an anthropomorphic origin, not only for spirits, but most things in the world (rice, water, animals, ritual paraphernalia, etc.). The protagonists of these myths are early mythological heroes subsumed under the general category of “ancestors” (*ulun tuha one*), and the myths are often referred to as evidence for how the latter established various cultural institutions and practices. Appropriately, these myths are chanted by the *longan*, which represents, as I have argued elsewhere, “a node of spatio-temporal unification” serving, together with the ancestor skulls, to integrate dispersed house groups and communities by connecting them to their socio-historical origins (Sillander 2004: 230). A common element of the origin myths, of special relevance here, is that the ancestors not only created but concretely gave rise to various phenomena in the world by becoming transformed into them upon death. Notably, the most important mediums through which such a transformation occurred are their blood and bodies. Much of what is important to man was generated from blood dripping from dying ancestors or plants sprouting from their decaying bodies. To mention just one example, rice originates from Luing, a young woman from whose armpits it gushed forth when she was killed, and upon death she was additionally transformed

into the spirit of rice as well as three leading spirit familiars fetched from three different locations by the ritual experts to lead negotiations with spirits during curing, *buntang*, and mortuary rituals, respectively.

These observations suggest that death, and the ancestors in particular, are viewed, not just a source of potency, but also as a source of the regeneration of life, in accordance with a regionally and globally widespread pattern (Bloch and Parry 1982, Fox 1987). There are many instances of a belief in Borneo that ancestors can somehow generate fertility and fecundity in the form of new life of plants or children. A well-known example is the Iban belief according to which the dead are transformed into dew which nurture rice plants (e.g., Sather 1994). I was told that a rationale for keeping ancestor skulls is that the *kelelungan* (in some unspecified way) make rice and plants grow, honey and game abound, etc., in a somewhat similar way to how Bornean headhunt skulls are widely reported to do (Needham 1976). Another example, on which I did not obtain information, but which is reported from all over Borneo, including from Luangans, is that ancestors can reincarnate as children (e.g., Hertz 1960: 60–61, 138–139, Hose and McDougall 1912, II: 47, Hudson 1966: 360, Metcalf 1982: 252, Schiller 1997: 39, Te Wechel 1915: 108). In a Barito Dusun variant of these beliefs, *kelelungan* is said to be sometimes transformed into an entity called *kerama keratan* which can enter fruit desired by pregnant women (Sarwoto 1963: 29). Among the Punan Bah of Sarawak, beliefs in the reincarnation of ancestors are especially developed, along with a sexual symbolism expressing their life-generating capacities through iconographic representations (Nicolaisen 1998, 2003). Among them everyone until recently took the name of – and in a sense incarnated – a particular ancestor (or, in the case of firstborn children, two: one from an ancestor on the mother's side, another from one on the father's), and the pelvic bones of the deceased, which are cleansed during secondary mortuary rituals, represent a “symbolic nucleus of sexuality and fertility” (1998: 367–369, 2003: 167).

Taken together, these beliefs may be seen as constituting one variant of a more generalized notion of ancestral potency as something transmissible and transformable, which is shared by the Bentian, Punan Bah, and other Borneans alike. When people die, and this is especially true for powerful people, they do not just disappear, but something of them remains and is translated into something new, such as the soul of the dead that comes into being when the life soul is extinguished, or the *naiyu* that these people may turn into, if possessing potency (*kekuasaan*, Indonesian). This translation is

mediated by the remains of the dead – pelvic bones, ancestor skulls – and material objects associated with them, which are inherited and passed down over the generations as *pusaka*, sacred inheritance. Inherited objects then accrue additional potency as they become associated with many ancestors over several generations, as in the case of the *longan*, whose potency is also explained in this way, besides as the result of having been anointed by blood in countless rituals. Another, somewhat inconspicuous, and possibly idiosyncratic, but nevertheless revealing, example of this pattern of transmitted and accumulating ancestral potency which I encountered during fieldwork relates to the old ironwood ladder of the village longhouse where I lived. One day a visitor to the house cut a small splinter from this ladder to insert between his front teeth before going on a journey, because, he said, it would increase his walking strength – adding that this was something that only wood used by the ancestors (*tuha one*) would do. Thereby he expressed a view that the association of something with the ancestors – especially if recurrent, and spanning several generations – has the capacity to endow it with potency. Ultimately, I propose, this and the other examples testifying to a notion of the ancestors as a source of transmissible potency reflect an understanding and ideology according to which those who came before engendered and created the world of those who came after.

The Sociological Importance of Ancestors beyond Ritual

Among the Bentian, ancestors are not only addressed in ritual but also referred to in public and private discourse. Indeed, “the ancestors” (*ulun tuha one, tuha one*) are one of the most authoritative and frequently invoked sources of authority among the Bentian. As such, they are often referred to as source of legitimacy for various kinds of action and states of affairs, especially for everything with a presumed local origin, but sometimes also for obviously non-traditional conditions or practices. For example, that a particular ritual has to be performed in a particular way – even in the case of new rituals or rituals which vary considerably between villages – is frequently argued for through claims that it represents original or ancient custom (*adet asar, lelukun naha*), and ritual chants often include explicit statements reminding ritual participants that they “follow the work” (*numun awing*) of their predecessors. Somewhat similarly, a principal form of legitimacy for the authority of leaders and ritual experts is that they represent the voice of the ancestors (*nukui boan tuha one*). In discourse, the

fact or assumption that something is associated with the ancestors is often presented as an argument sufficient in itself to legitimize a particular state of affairs. While this is not to say that this argument is always effective in practice – innovations and transformations of old practices do occur – it testifies to the strength and somewhat sacrosanct character of this kind of discursive ancestral authority, which is hardly ever explicitly contested, not even by modernization-minded individuals who routinely conduct or advocate action which breaks with ancestral tradition.

Besides for purposes of authorization, the ancestors, of whom people often speak in a markedly respectful, subdued tone, are also invoked in discourse because their precedence and accomplishments are taken to imply obligations. As among the Iban and other Dayaks, there are notions that “proper adherence to traditional rituals and other practices” may influence the ancestors to “look favorably upon” the living, and that such adherence “demonstrates their worth,” whereas non-adherence contests it and may provoke misfortune (Wadley 1999: 595; see also Schiller 2001: 76).²⁰ There is also an idea that what the ancestors did should be reciprocated through ritual offerings and reverence – in a similar way to how children should arrange *gombok* rituals for their parents in exchange for having been brought up by them. For example, I was told that performing *buntang* rituals – during which extended families or house groups come together to “erect the *longan*” (*nerek longan*) – is about “paying back the debt to the ancestors” (*bales utang dayang kepanei*).

Indeed, it is as if the deeds of the ancestors – including not only the customs and the customary law (*adet*) that they established, and the villages, houses and cultivation areas that particular representatives of them founded, but also, and equally importantly, the sustenance that everyone’s close personal ascendants provided – added up to a profound sense of debt toward all the ancestors. “Had it not been for the ancestors, people today would not exist” is a basic tenet variously expressed in different circumstances, especially in ritual chants and the elders’ speeches, but also in informal discussion. Such a sense of indebtedness is important in motivating beliefs and actions relating to the ancestors and the dead more generally, including dreams about them, which are common and frequently interpreted as signs of their dissatisfaction with the care and veneration offered by their descendants. In fact, it seems plausible that the authority and potency generally attributed to the ancestors partly represent projected feelings of this indebtedness, and that the latter derive, in particular, from the lived experience of relationships

with personally known elders and deceased relatives, in an analogous, albeit not identical, manner to how the ancestor cult of the Tallensi of west Africa represents “the transposition to the religious plane of the relationship of parents and children” (Fortes 1959: 30).²¹

The ancestors are thus important for the Bentian not only in ritual but also in discourse and everyday life. However, the strength of the authority of the ancestors, and the frequency with which they are invoked in discourse, does not in any straightforward way express their ritual importance, and cannot be explained with reference to eschatological beliefs alone. Indeed, when the ancestors are referred to in discourse as *ulun tuha one*, it is primarily in the sense of *past* people, or more specifically elders, not in the capacity of presently existing ancestral agencies (when they are referred to in the latter sense, they are designated as *kelelungan*, or *liau*, *gaib*, or *naiyu*). The everyday importance of the ancestors, in other words, largely expresses their psychological and symbolical historical significance, rather than their metaphysical or ritual importance. The importance of ancestors in discourse is much evident among Bentian Christians too, including people who do not acknowledge traditional eschatological beliefs and participate in, or at least perform, Kaharingan rituals, with the possible exception of death rituals for their deceased non-Christian relatives. Concerns about reciprocating and honoring the dead also continue to be important among Christians, in conformity with a common Indonesian pattern in which pre-Christian practices expressing such concerns persist even while other aspects of traditional religion decline (e.g., Coville 2002, Schiller 1997). One manifestation of this is the popularity among Christians of some new, professedly non-pagan, forms of honoring the dead outside Kaharingan ritual through water buffalo sacrifice and the erection of *batur*, many-layered *stupa*-like grave monuments, which symbolize both the status of the deceased and the affection of the relatives.

Rather than eschatological beliefs, such practices, like the importance of ancestors in discourse among both Christians and Kaharingans, presumably reflect more basic cultural notions, especially the deep-seated imperative of respecting and reciprocating one's elders and relatives, as well as a largely secular, general significance in society of ancestral authority, on the one hand, and individual ancestry, on the other – which are factors presumably motivating the persisting importance of ancestors in Kaharingan ritual, too. In particular, the complex ways in which the status of ancestors is interlinked with the status of people today are crucial in this respect. A special reason

for the present-day salience of ancestors in discourse is the importance of ancestral connections for substantiating increasingly threatened landrights, and the significance of ancestral tradition for legitimizing cultural identity and a persisting traditional way of life centered on swidden cultivation. Indeed, it is possible that references to the ancestors in discourse may for this reason be more common now than in the past. The strength of ancestral authority can partly be explained also by the constant references to them in discourse which have the effect of making this authority self-reproducing. Through these references it becomes taken-for-granted, “doxa” in Bourdieu’s sense (1977: 170), and through such linguistic and extra-linguistic “authorizing devices” as entextualization, formalization, and “indirectness,” ancestral tradition becomes tangible and tacitly represented as authoritative, refined, and pre-given (see Sillander 2004 for an analysis of these processes).

Of special significance in this respect is “ancestral language” (*basa tuha one*), that is, indirect or roundabout (*mengkelotes*) speech replete with metaphor, proverbs, archaisms, parallelism, alliteration, and other “poetic” attributes, a type of language used mainly by elders and most markedly in ritual chants and customary law negotiations. Through this language the ancestors are a constant presence in social life, and through the use of this language – which helps substantiate the proposition that leaders and ritual experts represent the voice of the ancestors – the authority and significance of “tradition” (*adat*) is compounded with that of the ancestors. Undoubtedly, the persisting significance of *adat* – in the sense both of tradition and customary law – for the reproduction of Bentian society, and the continuing relevance of ancestral authority for authorizing *adat*, are important reasons for invoking the ancestors in discourse.

In addition to reciprocity, another central cultural notion making ancestors relevant in Bentian discourse and beyond is what Fox has identified as a distinctive Austronesian “concern with ‘origins’” which is manifested, on the one hand, as a “fundamental epistemological orientation” and, on the other, as an ideological inclination to establish, on various levels (e.g., village, House, family, individual), status relationships through precedence, typically expressed in a botanical idiom of trunks and tips (1988: 13–14, 1993b: 16). Such a doubly manifested concern also informs Bentian relations with the ancestors, and relations between the living organized with reference to ancestors. For example, this is what the origin stories (*tempuun*) and the *longan* in different but related ways are essentially about. Like the above-mentioned inclination to assert ancestral origins for particular rituals

and customs, reciting origin stories serves to legitimize and authorize current practices not just by identifying them as ancestral custom but also, and more particularly, by connecting them to their ancestral *origins*. In common with a typical Austronesian pattern, origins and original performances of practices are imbued with a special, sacred character, and typically associated with an “owner” (*puun*, who is either an originator or custodian), and there exists a widely recognized imperative that the origins (*asar*) or associated “ownership” of various practices and things should be acknowledged or ideally traced back step by step in order to enable their proper use or appropriation.²² In further correspondence to this pattern, original instantiations of events and practices are perceived as singularly powerful and efficacious, and successive re-enactments as deriving their effectiveness from the originals of which they represent inferior replicas. Like many Austronesians, the Bentian conceive of the ancestral past as an unsurpassable glorious age, associated with a view of subsequent history as in a cultural and moral decline (e.g., Atkinson 1989: 53, 314, Geertz 1980: 15–18, Hagen 2006: 12, Keane 1997: 99).²³ Under these conditions, achieving betterment and overcoming incompleteness in the present is logically attempted by turning to the past, through efforts at symbolically returning or reconnecting to the revitalizing origins. As is typical of rituals in the region belonging to the category of the “great feast” (see Guerreiro 1992, Sellato 2002b), and other rituals occurring worldwide that correspond to what Horton (1970: 167–168) labelled “rites of recreation,” an important rationale for arranging Bentian *buntang* and *nalín taun* (community) rituals – and more particularly for reciting *tempuun* in them – is to achieve such revitalization through the celebration and symbolic re-enactment of original events and an earlier era of greater powers.

The complex symbolism and practices related to the ironwood *longan* represents another example of origin-orientation among the Bentian. Formerly a defining characteristic of a *lou*, the *longan* is a symbol of house groups and communities, and their connection with their origins, both their specific short-term historical origins (from predecessor houses and communities from which the *longan* ideally was moved), and generic long-term mythological origins (acknowledged in the *tempuun* recited at its base). Through its concrete form, evoking an image of growth and origination of a clump of plants from a single source, and through its location within multi-family houses, it stands, like similarly functioning house altars and “mother” or “navel” house posts found widely in

Austronesian societies,²⁴ as a permanent reminder of this constitutive and derivative relationship of their inhabitants with the past. In addition, during collective rituals, it becomes a center and medium of acquisition of “endogenous” potency – derived from the sacra, ancestors, and protecting and guardian spirits of the house, community, and local environment – which is temporarily or permanently concentrated here.²⁵ Like the Tanimbarese house altar (*tavu*) described by McKinnon (1991: 92, 94), the *longan* is thus a symbolic representation both of the past as a “source of life” and of “the group of descendants who have issued forth from this source,” and is also a “pathway of time and identity,” that is, a ritual instrument of revitalization and differentiation enabling an “active relation between the past and the present, the ancestors and the descendants, the root and the tip.”

In this respect, the *longan* expresses a relationship with the past which is representative also of the general character of Bentian relations with the ancestors. The ancestors are perceived as authoritative and referred to in discourse largely in the capacity as antecedents and originators. As the expression *ulun tuha one* suggests, the ancestors essentially represent “people who *came before*,” or more specifically, “elders who came before,” that is, genealogical or structural antecedents associated with a position of authority. Conversely, it is to signify their position in such a relationship with the ancestors that people today refer to themselves as “grandchildren” (*opo*) or “tips growing forth” (*lai odi*).

In this capacity as the ones who came before, Bentian ancestors are invested with a special ideological significance. As of the ancestors of the Lio of Flores, it can be said that “the indigenous moral universe and ontological status of society is constituted by and through [them]” (Howell 1994: 18). This is to say that the ancestors represent a principal ideal for how Bentian lives should and can be lived, and that reference to them in discourse, myths, and ritual, like reference to *adat* (custom, customary law), typically serves to reproduce what Durkheim (1995: 16) called the “authority of society,” that is, the central values – sharing, reciprocity, respect, consensus, etc. – which encourage integration and relation-affirming behavior in society. The ancestors are associated with an idealized notion of an undivided, complete, and shared past in which the above-mentioned sociocentric values were still strong, and invoking them in this capacity typically serves to impose unity and integration upon communities and families in the present.

Prominent Individual Ancestors and Ancestors as an Anonymous Collectivity

To the Bentian, the ancestors thus in a basic sense represent “society,” a fact which may help explain an important conspicuous characteristic of Bentian references to the ancestors, namely, that they are typically referred to as an anonymous collectivity. Collective and anonymous reference to the ancestors is consistent with this important function of promoting social cohesion and consensus. Talking about them in this guise is a way of talking about established tradition and collective opinion. It is also consistent with their purported unanimity, and it has a different force than talking about specific ancestors, which may be divisive. As nobody’s ancestors in particular they are everybody’s ancestors.

Anonymity is thus an appropriate quality of the ancestors congruous with their general social significance. Anonymity notably characterizes not only “the ancestors” (*ulun tuha one*) as referred to in discourse, but frequently also the *liau* and *kelelungan*, as addressed in ritual.²⁶ Anonymity is indeed a common fate and referential characteristic of ancestors in Austro-nesian societies, especially of commoners’ ancestors (e.g., Bloch 1971: 126, Giambelli 2002: 65–67, McKinnon 1991: 109, Pelras 2002: 125–126, Traube 1986: 200, Waterson 1990: 205). There are several, and possibly many, Borneo societies, in addition to the Bentian, in which most references to the ancestors are to “an anonymous whole” (e.g., see Geddes 1954: 26, Metcalf 1982: 241–243). Frequently, the process of making ancestors seems to be essentially about making the dead into anonymous spirits and merging them with the ancestors as a totality. This is, for example, what happens to the Bentian *kelelungan* when they join the heavenly *kelelungan* collectivity. Giambelli’s observations on Nusa Penida ancestors are here applicable for the Bentian: “The tendency is to shift from a recognizable identity to a god status, distinguished by its attributes (e.g., fertility) and not by its former individuality” (2002: 67). Alternatively, what is at stake in this process could be described through Elizabeth Coville’s characterization of Toraja relations with the dead’s remains as being about “dismantling the deceased as a person and transforming it, *over time*, into a generalized ancestral spirit” (2002: 70, original italics; see also Bloch 1971). The heavenly *kelelungan*, and the ambiguously identified spirit agencies associated with the ancestor skulls, clearly represent something quite different than the beloved relatives they once were. They, like archetypal ancestors in most societies, are not ordinary



Figure 1.4. Elder with wife displaying heirlooms (*pusaka*) substantiating his descent from forebears in a genealogy leading back to a powerful local ancestor.

human beings of flesh and blood (indeed, as Hertz's theory suggests, they become ancestors when only the bones remain). Rather, they are something more akin to symbols: beings reduced to the qualities that they are ideally or stereotypically thought to represent (e.g., virtuousness and purity in the case of the *kelelungan*, excessive potency in the case of the *naiyu* – and mischievousness and dirtiness in the case of *liau*).

Not all references to Bentian ancestors represent them in the guise of an anonymous collectivity, however. Sometimes, ancestors are referred to individually by name, and sometimes this serves the somewhat contrary purpose of differentiating between groups or people, and establishing status distinctions between them. This is not to say that individual ancestors are not also invoked for purposes of promoting unity and unanimity. References to individual ancestors serve this purpose too, for example by enabling a common point of reference and a source of internal solidarity for groups whose identity they help define, or by metonymically exemplifying the virtuous relation-affirming qualities which are stereotypically attributed to the ancestors as a whole in contrast to their modern descendants (who are portrayed as more prone to deviate from the moral ideals of *adat*). But unlike references to the ancestors as an anonymous totality, references to individual ancestors often have a “differentiating” objective. To give some examples, individual ancestors may be invoked – and genealogies (*tukui*) leading back to them traced – for purposes of placing individuals, families, or communities in positions of precedence or general superiority *vis-à-vis* others, thereby, among other things, contributing to people's legitimacy to act as leaders or ritual experts, substantiating their claims to membership in particular, more or less inclusive, social categories, or giving them bilaterally traced rights to previously cultivated or uncultivated land, particular forest resources, or heirlooms (see Figure 1.4).

These individually invoked ancestors are mostly individuals who achieved exceptional renown – and are typically the subject of stories recounting their more or less extraordinary deeds and capacities. In most cases, they were leaders of particular houses or communities, although they include ritual experts, warriors, and other influential people. Often they were “founding ancestors,” who founded Houses (*lou*), communities, or “sub-ethnic” local groups, or who opened up particular areas of land for cultivation,²⁷ and it is typically from them that potent objects, associated with *naiyu*, are inherited or originally derive. Sometimes such individuals were also responsible for erecting the *longan* of the houses that they founded or assumed leadership

over, and sometimes their skulls (or those of their ascendants or other close relatives) themselves became *utek tuha longan*, "elder skulls of the *longan*."²⁸

As this indicates, some Bentian ancestors are important by in several ways providing a focus for particular groups. In so doing they notably play, although to a somewhat reduced extent today, an important role in Bentian social organization, thus demonstrating that ancestors can have a political, extra-domestic, socially organizing function in bilateral societies. Their importance in this respect is two-fold. In the first place, their remains and the objects associated with them represent symbols of identity of particular social entities (houses or villages), and of these entities' continuity with their predecessors, as well as a means of the integration of these entities in the present through ritual.²⁹ That is, the *longan*, ancestor skulls, and ancestral objects symbolize social units and their histories, and through ritual action involving these objects their members come together and become reminded of their common identity. In the second place, people recognize membership in houses and former local groups by tracing descent from founders, leaders, or other famous individuals of these social categories.³⁰ For example, several of my informants claimed descent from the Jato Rempangan (a compound category consisting of two former, extensively inter-marrying and somewhat inconsistently differentiated, local groups), substantiated through genealogies connecting them to Empan Ma Langit or Hujan Panas, the two most famous past leaders of this grouping. Most of the former Bentian, Benuaq, and Teweh river Luangan sub-ethnic groups that were the largest units of collective identification until the late nineteenth century are claimed to have been founded by particular ancestors, some of whom are believed to have been heavenly spirits who descended to earth and thereupon gave rise to these groups.³¹

Ancestorship and Eldership as Social Parentage

Particular ancestors thus have what could be described as a constitutive social significance for particular local groups among the Bentian. Typical for these ancestors is that they play this pivotal role in society in continuation of roles that they played already in life.³² While alive, they were prospective ancestors, as are indeed important elders and other prominent figures in present-day communities. There is, in this respect, a continuum, as well as a symbiosis, between elders and ancestors.³³ As already noted, elders derive much of their authority from the ancestors, at the same time as they are the

principal proponents of the ideals associated with them. The designation *tuha*, which is used of both elders and ancestors, expresses this continuity. The significance of the ancestors for society is also similar to that of elders. (Society is in both cases organized through them: either with reference to them, or through their agency.) Indeed, ancestors, as opposed to ordinary dead, *are* elders. This holds true both for the *utek tuha longan*, which represent, at least on one level, former elders, and the anonymous *ulun tuha one* collectivity, who are symbolical elders. Elders and ancestors also both stand in a position as *puun* (“trunks,” “sources,” “owners,”) *vis-à-vis* their descendants, and the status of both largely derives thereof. Indicating the importance of this position, Bentians ideally have one or several living *puun* in the form of elders (usually of grandparental age) addressed by this term, to whom it is expected that they can turn with requests for support or guidance. Even such elders, although often influential mainly within their own families, and not necessarily influential or wealthy enough to receive exhumation, are also likely candidates to become ancestors, in at least some sense of the word. This was nicely illustrated to me during a short field visit in 2007 when an old death ritual expert mentioned three such elders that I used to know, and who had died since my last visit without receiving exhumation, as examples of individuals who were certain to have become protecting spirits (*pengiring*) who in the capacity as *kelelungan* would continue to look after their descendants in the same way that they had while alive.

Anceatorship and eldership are thus closely associated and mutually reinforcing institutions which share the basic functions of reproducing society and their own authority, that of “seniors” or “antecedents” (*tuha*) in a generic sense. They – both their individual representatives and these categories as a whole – also share another fundamental attribute of Bentian ancestorship, eldership, and kinship. This is the fact that their authority primarily reflects acquired as opposed to ascribed status. That is to say that the private feelings, religious beliefs, ritual actions, and public discourse of which they are the object, reflect what they have done, especially in terms of “coming before” by way of providing guidance, protection, nurturance, and other life- and society-sustaining services. Significantly, many ancestors who represent important figures for present-day communities had no descendants, strictly speaking, in terms of children or grandchildren, or living genealogical descendants further down their severed genealogical lines. This was the case, for example, with the above-mentioned former Jato Rempangan leader

Empan Ma Langit, and with Rurah Jaga Wana, the most important past leader of the community where I was based during fieldwork.³⁴ Such “ancestors” would perhaps not qualify as ancestors, according to a strict genealogical definition, although they were regarded as ancestors in being included in the *ulun tuha one* category, and by representing important references for society among members of the groups that they had led while alive. Indeed, it seems that they, like the *ulun tuha one* generally, are conceived of and important to society more primarily as important “local predecessors” than as ancestors in a strict genealogical sense.

A similar situation seemingly prevailed among the Bidayuh, judging by Geddes’s observations that the spirits of important, individually mentioned ancestors invoked in community ritual were not recruited on the basis of genealogical connection, but selected on the principle “that they must be the spirits of persons who have won distinction in their own day” either in agriculture, religion, or jural affairs (Geddes 1954: 26). At least among the Bentian it is clear that someone does not, unlike in some African societies, become an ancestor “because he has living descendants of the right category” (Fortes 1965: 129, italics added). On the contrary, the situation is almost diametrically opposed to that of the Tallensi among whom ancestorhood “is conferred on persons . . . who have jural authority in living social relations, not on those who imprint their personalities on their off-spring by virtue of their part in bringing them up (Fortes 1965: 130).” The likelihood of becoming a reference for society after death, or obtaining exhumation and special treatment of one’s remains, is decisively determined by one’s social influence in life. Moreover, affiliation with groups for which ancestors represent a focus in Bentian society (houses and sub-ethnic local groups) is flexibly and broadly recognized also on other criteria than descent, such as affinity and residential proximity, in conformity with the pattern identified by Lévi-Strauss (1983) as typical for “house societies.” The same apparently also holds true for the ritual use of ancestor skulls.³⁵ In a similar vein, the *puun* in the form of elders that one can turn to may also be non-genealogical (e.g., connected to ego through affinal or adoptive links), and they generally owe their position as *puun* not primarily to exact genealogical status but to their acquired social status as “protectors” – which is what singles them out from a larger group of *potential puun* (see Sillander 2004: 281).

Interestingly, Sather (1996: 85) defines the Iban cognate *pun*, which designates individuals acting as leaders of longhouses, longhouse compartments, expeditions, and rituals as “both initiator and locus of continuity.”

This is meant to convey, among other things, that people who assume the status of *pun* often do so solely or primarily on the basis of initiative, as opposed to descent (indeed the word is often used of individuals precisely in the sense of “initiator”). As Freeman expressed it, “everyone [traditionally] was the source (*pun*) of his own achievements” (1981: 38, quoted in Sather 1996: 84). However, when people assume leadership over groups or group undertakings (in which capacity Ibans, significantly, refer to them as *tuai*, “elders”), they simultaneously become potential sources of genealogies and groups enduring over generations. They thus become, or institute, *pun* in the sense of “stems,” “trunks,” or “foundations,” from which their descendants and successors can trace origins or succession (or secession) and thus increase *their* statuses or chances of acquiring certain positions.

As this suggests, achieved “eldership” in both societies is a structural prerequisite for ancestorship, and, for individuals in them, typically a stage in the process of becoming an ancestor. However, it shows that eldership is not solely a function of acquired status, since the acquired status of the important dead can significantly (although not unconditionally) adduce to the status of their flexibly self-defined descendants and predecessors. Descent, or a more loosely defined connection to the past, indeed matters in both societies, and references to ancestors serve to no small degree such a hierarchy-promoting function. However, this function is counteracted by achievement-orientation and egalitarian ideology, which allow for the emergence of elders and ancestors from non-prestigious descent lines and families, as well as the bilateral kinship system, which complicates the business of descent reckoning and descent group organization. If Geddes’s (1954: 26) analysis of the Bidayuh is correct, precisely these factors may also explain some of the distinctive features of ancestorship in this kind of societies, namely, the propensity to refer to the ancestors as an anonymous collectivity, and the flexibility characterizing notions of who may be counted or function as an ancestor. In non-stratified bilateral societies, characterized by complexly cross-cutting kinship allegiances, limited political authority, and far-reaching individual autonomy, achieving integration through reference to ancestors is a delicate problem fraught with uncertainty and calling for different solutions than in unilineal societies. I propose that these features of ancestorship, like the associated ideology of inclusiveness, characteristic of both the Bidayuh and Bentian, facilitate social harmony and the flexible use of scarce and contested social capital under such structural conditions.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the varied manifestations of Bentian ancestors, and the different ritual and extra-ritual contexts in which they are invoked. Ancestors have a complex significance in Bentian religion and society. They are sources of both potency and authority. Multiple varieties of spirits of the dead and spirits originating from ancestors (*liau*, *kelelungan*, *gaib*, *naiyu*, *seniang*) are regularly invoked in ritual, beyond the multi-staged mortuary rituals, while the ancestors as an anonymous collectivity and prominent named predecessors represent important references in public discourse. Sometimes, the ancestors, in the guise of *kelelungan* spirits, are invoked because of their perceived ability to influence events by way of providing protection or blessing. At other times they are invoked, especially in the capacity as dead predecessors, because connections with them serve to encourage group integration or solidary relations between the living. A central ideological function of Bentian ancestorship is to promote the “authority of society”: socio-centric values which encourage integration and relation-affirming behavior. More than a form of “traditional authority,” the ancestors prominently represent an exemplary moral authority, especially when referred to as an anonymous collectivity of “elders who came before” (*ulun tuha one*), in which capacity they are associated with an idealized undivided past and the ideals of customary law (*adat*). Today, references to the ancestors in this capacity are additionally motivated by their association with contested local and traditional, as opposed to foreign and modern, ways.

However, Bentian ancestorship has another side to it. While frequently serving to impose unity and integration upon communities and families, it also sometimes exerts a differentiating and potentially divisive influence. Prominent figures of the past increase the status to their living descendants, and their possibilities of acquiring or maintaining authority positions as family or community leaders, ritual experts, etc., thus promoting a degree of status differentiation in society. Ancestors, including less prominent ones, are also important because genealogies traced from them serve to establish rights to land and forest resources for particular individuals and groups as opposed to others. This dual character of ancestral authority is not surprising. It reflects the multiple, often situationally variable, aspirations that different or even the same individuals may have. But it shows that individual and collective manifestations of ancestors play partly different roles in Bentian society, reminiscent of similarly differentiated functions of

different categories of ancestors in other societies (Calhoun 1980: 309–310, 315–316, Freedman 1967: 86–88).

As founders or leaders of particular enduring groups (communities, Houses), individually invoked ancestors have special significance in that references to them serve to integrate these groups, as do their skulls and material objects associated with them (including the *longan*, the principal ritual attractor of multi-family houses) by becoming objects of ritual action for these groups. In this capacity, the ancestors play an important role in Bentian social organization. Bentian relations with the ancestors may not amount to a “cult of the ancestors” in the strictest sense of Durkheim’s understanding of the term – that is, as “a system of rites, feasts, and various ceremonies *all having the characteristics that they recur periodically*” (1995: 60, original italics) – but certainly in a moderately strict understanding, since the ancestors are regularly presented with respect and offerings (*besemah*), and asked to provide protection and well-being whenever extended family or community rituals are performed. In addition, the social entities thus interacting with Bentian ancestors constitute “cult groups” in that this activity functions to congregate and solidify them just as similar activity does for descent groups in unilineal societies (Durkheim 1995: 60, Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 163). They form typical examples of what Shelly Errington (1987: 406) calls “worship communities”: structurally nebulous groups which in accordance with a typical Southeast Asian pattern are most fundamentally constituted through ritual activity centered on objects connecting them with their origins.

However, Bentian ritual invocations of the ancestors are integrated with invocations of various other spirits, and “ancestor worship” is in this case clearly less objectified than among groups like the Tallensi, whose “cosmology is wholly dominated by the ancestral cult” (Fortes 1959: 60). As a special expression of this integration, but increasing rather than decreasing their importance, mediation is also a principal function of Bentian ancestors, an observation at odds with Chambert-Loir’s and Reid’s (2002: xxi) proposition that Southeast Asian ancestors “are not intercessors with any other category of spirits.” Ancestor spirits (*kelelungan*, *gaib*) are the principal spirit helpers (*mulung*) in Bentian rituals, and objects and remains associated with them represent a principal source of “endogenous” potency deriving from beyond the ancestors themselves.

The Bentian dead are thus not of concern to the living merely as a source of loss or misfortune – although they are also significant in this way, as

testified by their frequent appearances in dreams and as suspects of soul theft – but as a source or means of acquiring potency and well-being, too. The two-sided significance of death – both debilitating and regenerative, promoting attempts at both separation and reintegration with the dead – is represented by the two oppositionally-defined Bentian categories of spirits of the dead, the principally malevolent *liau*, and the principally benevolent *kelelungan*. The fact that a category of spirits of the dead is specifically associated with the regenerative aspect of death testifies to a belief that people, and powerful people in particular, may give rise to sources of potency after death (e.g., *kelelungan* and *naiyu* spirits, ancestor skulls, ancestral objects), and demonstrates that the Bentian indeed recognize *ancestors*, in the sense of respected and authoritative dead capable of influencing the living.

Why there should exist such a belief, and why ancestors should be respected and authoritative, are complex questions to which I have suggested several answers. One is that the authority of the ancestors legitimizes the authority of the elders and thus motivates them to reproduce it, and another that the elders' constant invocation of it in discourse, and the manner in which it is represented, establishes it as authoritative doxa. Yet another is the widespread Austronesian notion that potency is achievable and transmissible, so that demonstrated potency or authority in life remains associated with certain people or their remains after death (Fox 1987: 525). Elder and ancestral authority in several respects form a continuum, and notions about the ancestors in complex ways express the importance that particular dead people had in life, including leaders, who had a special social significance for the communities that they founded or led, and everyone's personal ascendants, whose actions people feel personally motivated to reciprocate and honor. Interaction with the ancestors is motivated by projected feelings of indebtedness and respect toward these people, and the cultural imperatives of reciprocity and precedence, which augment these sentiments. In this regard, Bentian ancestorship has a social foundation, as it has also in that ancestors, particularly in the guise of "elders who came before," are essentially invoked, not as genealogical forebears, but as local predecessors who through their actions laid the foundations for subsequent life. It is an acquired social rather than inherited genealogical status which is decisive in granting the ancestors special status as references for society, just as it is in granting them special mortuary treatment.

This social foundation of Bentian ancestorship points to an additional reason why ancestors represent a source of potency and authority.

Ancestralship articulates a localized ontology and world view focused on relations with kin and neighbors, and livelihoods and life trajectories organized within the parameters of these relations. It reflects embeddedness in a small-scale social universe and local environment in which the authority of the ancestors and *adat* (tradition, customary law) is still relevant, and notions of ancestral or ancestrally-derived potency represent symbolically cogent and ideologically expedient explanations of life events. As a cultural idiom, it bespeaks the fact and doctrine that society and cultural institutions were created by local predecessors, and that prior human action – especially, what elders did and dictated – fundamentally influences most people's life courses.

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Notes

1 On the basis of scholarly ascription and a weak degree of self-identification, the Bentian belong to the Luangan, a term which signifies a loosely integrated and vaguely delimited “tribal group” consisting of a number of culturally and linguistically related subgroups (e.g., Benuaq, Tunjung, and Lawangan), who occupy the hilly interior area between the middle reaches of the Barito and Mahakam rivers,

in the Indonesian provinces of East and Central Kalimantan (Sillander 1995, 2004, Weinstock 1983). The total population of the Luangan is about 100,000 people. They show important linguistic and cultural similarities with the other major Dayak groups of south Borneo, that is, the Ngaju, Uut Danum, Ma'anyan, and, in particular, the Dusun (who Weinstock, 1983, included in the Luangan category).

2 In addition, certain notions and practices suggest the *juus* exists in several places simultaneously. At the conclusion of *buntang* rituals, the souls of the sponsoring social unit enter a soul house (*blai juus*) where they are supposed to stay between rituals, protected by the shaman (*belian*) and *seniang* in a location in heaven. Moreover, every person has invisible counterparts in the form of *samat* plants – coconut palms, banana plants, hibiscus bushes, etc. – planted in the village flower grove (*baang bunge*) or on a swidden site upon birth, and invisible *samat* plants planted during *buntang* rituals in a heavenly location where they are guarded by the *seniang*. Yet another counterpart on the person, also said to be guarded by the *seniang* in heaven, is the placenta (*juma*). The condition of all these counterparts, like that of the soul, affects the well-being of the person associated with them.

3 Weinstock (1987: 79–80) describes this process as the “bifurcation of the *juus* into *liau* and *kelelungan*.” However, according to my information it seems rather that the *juus* becomes the *kelelungan* while the *liau* is the replacement of something else, more precisely, an ill-defined “bodily vital principle,” associated with the shadow or breath of people. Supporting this are the facts that *kelelungan* is often addressed as *juus kelelungan*, while *liau* never is; that the *juus* is returned to the body through the head; and that the *juus* is indeed said to become *kelelungan*, while the body is said to become *liau*. However, a contrary view is provided by some Benuaq informants of Venz (2002: 91), according to whom *liau* represents the postmortal counterpart of *juus*.

4 For some examples of these associations and the pervasive importance of number symbolism among the Bentian, two iron objects may be struck together seven times to call *liau*, and eight times to call *kelelungan*. Mortuary rituals always last, according to schedule, an uneven number of days, whereas life rituals theoretically last an even number of days.

5 An exception pertains to the *kelelungan* of some ritual experts (including both *belians* and *waras*) who do not live in Tenangkai but in another heavenly location (*Jaa Jatus*) from where they are called during ritual (cf. Sather, this volume, and Appell and Appell 2003, for similar beliefs elsewhere in Borneo). Regarding Tenangkai, I also encountered some less prevalent notions (especially among laymen and in the upper Teweh area) according to which Tenangkai is located not in heaven but on earth, either on an invisible mountain located between Mount Lumut and the nearby Peyuyan mountain, or on the latter itself.

6 In illustrating the two-sided significance of death, *liau* and *kelelungan* are notably also mutually enforcing, so that the former serves to stress the importance of the

latter and the ancestors' generative importance by way of contrast, and vice versa. This calls to mind Bloch and Parry's idea (1982: 18) that "The 'good' regenerative death can only be constructed in antithesis to an image of 'bad' death, which it therefore implies. It requires and must even emphasize what it denies, and cannot obliterate that on which it feeds."

7 Even though the Benuaq are said to have learnt their presently practiced format of mortuary rituals from the Bentian (before that they reportedly only practiced a simpler form of death ritual known as *setanggih*), most Bentians and the Benuaq follow slightly different traditions of death ritual, referred to as *wara Tiwei*, and *wara Pira*, respectively (however, the lower Lawa Bentian follow, like the Benuaq, the latter). Among the Benuaq, there are three levels of death ritual: *parem api*, *kenyau*, and *kwangkai*. An ordinary seven or nine day Bentian *gombok* involving water buffalo sacrifice is basically analogous to a *kenyau*, and a *gombok mpe selimat* roughly analogous to *kwangkai* (however, an ordinary *gombok* includes many elements only found in the *kwangkai* among the Benuaq). The greater number of levels of death ritual, and the latter's greater length, among the Benuaq probably reflect the greater degree of stratification developed among them in the nineteenth century (as well as their custom of funding rituals through extensive gambling arranged during them). In fact, many aspects of Bentian and Benuaq eschatology express status concerns and unequal economic resources: the differing number of *batur* (stupa-like, many-storeyed monuments of planks) erected on graves; the ideas about different layers on Mount Lumut and in the heavenly abode of *kelelungan*; and the restricted use of certain decorations on coffins and bone ossuaries. An expression of similar concerns in a related society is the existence of two different types of mortuary rituals, *bukas* and *wara*, performed by the Barito Dusun for ordinary people and leaders, respectively (Mallinckrodt 1927: 558). Concerns about the social status of the deceased and, by extension, of living relatives, are indeed important considerations in mortuary rituals.

8 Unlike in some societies, the mortuary taboos are thus not restricted to a fixed period, their length is determined instead by the performance of the ritual (cf. Hertz 1960: 39–41). Thus the ritual cannot in this case be regarded as merely "confirmatory" (i.e., as confirming, or celebrating, the separation of the body and soul and the deceased's transition to the afterworld) as Metcalf argues for the elective Berawan secondary mortuary ritual (*nulang*) (see Nicolaisen 2003: 166–167). Neither is it the state of the corpse in itself which determines the conception of the soul, as Appell and Appell (2003: 103) also observe for another Borneo society.

9 An attempt to dispel this heat (*layeng lihang*) associated with death and to replace it with a "cool," favorable state (*rengin meroe*) is also made already at the conclusion of the *gombok* when the fire associated with the dead person (*runong apui meramai*) is put out with water. In addition, every *gombok* is immediately followed by a short, one-day life ritual (*belian sapu ipar*, or alternatively, a longer-lasting *buntang* ritual)

serving the same purpose. What is conceived of as heat here is closely equivalent to what is described elsewhere in terms of mortuary "pollution" (e.g., the "impure cloud" of the Ngaju) (e.g., Hertz 1960: 37–39). Special rituals serving to drive off such mortuary pollution, which partly arises from the dangerous contact with death that the mortuary rituals entail, are widespread (Hertz 1960: 64–65); one example is the Ngaju *balian balaku untung*.

10 According to the origin myth of water (*tempuun danum*), the water in this heavenly pool was created from the tip of the destroyed *putang* tree from which water originates. Interestingly, the Ngaju soul of the dead is bathed at the heavenly "pool of the Water of Life" before being admitted to the village of the dead (*lewu liau*) (Schärer 1963: 143), and in the Ngaju creation myth, chips from the annihilated "tree of life," which contains the "Water of Life" (*danum kaharingan*), generated the waters of the upperworld (Schärer 1963: 28).

11 During the *gombok*, numerous dead *wara* who assist the living *wara* in their work are enumerated and mentioned by name, typically by teknonyms or teknonym-like nicknames, or by special *wara* names. During *wara* and *belian* initiation rites (*tumbang*), long lists of past teachers are also similarly acknowledged. Thus, relations with dead *wara* and *belian* provide examples of a special, and rather undisputable, form of ancestorship, which is focused on ancestors individually remembered and regularly contacted for services.

12 In fact, as already indicated, not even the *liau* is completely forgotten after the *gombok*, even though separation with it is the desired outcome of the ritual. Symbolizing the less than immaculate sentiments that the dead in the capacity as ordinary, non-deified persons can be expected to feel, it is expected that the *liau* might still miss, and want to meddle in the life of, the living, for which reason precautions (not necessarily successful) have to be taken. Thus, every *buntang* begins by an attempt to send off the *liau* to prevent them from disturbing the ritual proceedings. Food offerings are also put out on graves, and during the harvest ritual (*kerewaiyu*) seven small parcels containing young, unhusked rice (*oto*) are suspended outside the door of the farmhouse where the ritual is held as offerings to the *liau*. However, both the *liau* and *kelelungan* can, in fact, be dissatisfied with the living, and communicate this through dreams or soul theft. Among other things, this reflects the fact that the use of the *liau* and *kelelungan* as symbols of two contrary aspects of the dead and death is not consistent, and that they may both occasionally symbolize the dead in a "total" or "undifferentiated" sense.

13 Formerly these ancestor skull boxes were opened and the skulls taken out and anointed with blood and coconut water, but this practice has been discontinued, probably because of the primitiveness associated with it.

14 It may be, for instance, that some form of relationship is maintained with the skulls of those ancestors whose remains have been exhumed and subsequently

placed in bone ossuaries. The ancestors (*ulun tuha one*), at least, were said to have maintained contacts with them. A well-known example of such contact with the ancestors recounted in numerous origin myths is when the mythological hero and *belian* Kilip asks for advice from, and provides offerings of black sticky rice and barbecued chicken for, his father Renatun Mulung, whose remains are stored in a *temla* (see also Schärer 1963: 148). In addition, the ancestors allegedly “meditated” (*betapa*) on graves (the Iban, similarly, were reported to sleep on graves “in hope of getting some benefit from . . . [the dead] through dreams, or otherwise”: see Perham 1968: 211). It is also my impression that Bentians maintained contacts with ancestors or recently dead relatives in private (although informants were reluctant to discuss this with me). According to Sarwoto (1963: 27–28), the one category of spirits which the Barito Dusuns knew best, and were most at ease contacting, were the ancestor spirits; offerings were often given to them, and help asked from them, without the mediation of ritual experts. Sarwoto also reported on an obsolete usage of ancestor skulls in harvest rituals during which people would dance around and burn incense beneath the suspended skull of a family ancestor, taken down for the occasion from the rafters.

15 *Naiyu*-like spirits are referred to by cognates of the word throughout south Borneo. They exhibit intriguing resemblances with various other Southeast Asian spirit categories, including the “superhumans” of the Orang Asli peoples of peninsular Malaysia (e.g., Endicott 1979, Howell 1989), and the *dhanyang* guardian spirits of Java (Wessing 2006). Sometimes associated with aquatic snakes, they also resemble the widely recognized *naga*, or water dragon, spirits (although many south Borneans also recognize another spirit, known as *juata* by the Bentian, which even more closely resembles the *naga*). The association of *naiyu* with pythons and thunder echoes widespread beliefs found throughout Southeast Asia and parts of Melanesia (Strathern and Stewart 2000).

16 Payne (this volume) gives a similar interpretation of what happens when the *kelelungan* is installed as a protecting spirit: the status of the *kelelungan* is raised to *naiyu*. Support for this interpretation is additionally provided by the Barito Dusun who have a ritual called *balian naju'* (i.e., *belian naiyu*), which serves to transform *liau* into *kelelungan* and relocate it from Mount Lumut to the highest level of the sky (*bawo langit*) (Sarwoto 1963: 29). Among Dusuns and Lawangans in the Barito region, *liau* and *kelelungan* do notably not have a parallel existence as among the Bentian, Benuaq, and Teweh river Luangans; indeed it seems that some groups in this region do not recognize *kelelungan* at all (cf. Mallinckrodt 1974: 16, Te Wechel 1915: 100–110). Among those that do, the journey of the spirits of the dead is different: *liau* first goes to Mount Lumut and continues from there up to heaven (to either Tenangkai or Bawo langit) now transformed into *kelelungan* (cf. Weinstock 1983: 30). Sarwoto (1963: 29) notably characterizes *kelelungan* (*kalalungan*) as a being “on the same level as the gods,” a characterization which is pertinent for the

Bentian, too (although the *kelelungan* of the recently dead are not yet that godly or unambiguously good), and consistent with a notion of *kelelungan* as a symbol for the good or regenerative aspect of death.

17 A very similar case is also presented by the Uut Danum, among whom the *nanyu* are described as spirits of ancient dead and invited to participate in dances staged prior to the presentation of sacrifices to the newly deceased during secondary mortuary rituals (Pascal Couderc, personal communication).

18 These early human-like beings who preceded mankind are sometimes referred to as *naiyu*, and according to Hopes et al. (1997: 13–14) this is a generic Benuaq designation for them. However, according to the origin myths of mankind and *naiyu*, the *naiyu* (or at least some of them) originate from man.

19 The *seniang* notably in many ways resemble the so-called gods of the Iban, the *petara* (*betara*), that Sather describes as “ancestors with cosmic attributes” who “share a common origin” with man (1994: 119, 131).

20 Although important, these notions are notably not directly sanctioned by the ancestors. Unlike what is commonly reported from Africa, ancestral *agencies* are not clearly identified as guardians of ancestral tradition, and rarely themselves punish breaches of it. Even though both the *liau* and *kelelungan* of dead people within living memory (including people who have undergone secondary mortuary ritual) may capture their living relatives’ souls, this is perceived to express their personal interests rather than a generalized moral concern or a response to their relatives’ failure to comply with ancestral authority *per se*. In this respect, the Bentian material supports Chambert-Loir’s and Reid’s (2002: xxi) general observation that Southeast Asian “ancestors do not punish offenses against any overarching ethical code; they seek retribution for any lack of proper attention to themselves.” However, it would be a mistake not to associate the ancestors with morality or to conclude that compliance with ancestral tradition is unsanctioned. The social significance of Bentian ancestors is largely, as I argue below, as a moral authority. Furthermore, even though ancestor spirits are not clearly recognized as overseeing compliance with tradition, both *liau* and *kelelungan* have protecting spirits (*pengiring*, or *pengentu*) which may punish non-compliance with illness or misfortune. This task is occasionally undertaken also by the *naiyu* known as *semerem* who are associated with the ancestor skulls and ancestral objects stored by the *longan* and characteristically announce dissatisfaction with human conduct through loud thunderclaps (*poing prempeng*). Breaches of customary law, especially in the case of incestuous relations (*sumbang*) may also provoke the heavenly *seniang* who regulate the order of the world to induce misfortune (e.g., by upsetting the natural order). The *seniang*, and the *pali* spirits who oversee conformity with the *pali* taboos, are indeed two categories of spirits (which both originate from man according to mythology) that routinely punish violations of ancestral tradition. Finally, ancestral authority and tradition are sanctioned through supernatural means

in that soul weakness, enabling soul theft by any type of spirit, including ancestor spirits, is seen to result from the transgression of taboos (*pali*); from immoral action entailing disinclination to affirm social relations (*tapen*); and from action entailing intergenerational disrespect (*bunsung*). These regulations are important in promoting adherence to tradition, particularly aspects of it relating to morality.

21 Fortes argued that ancestor worship “is rooted in the cultural construction of the nuclear filio-parental relationship . . . , however elaborately it may be projected onto preparental antecedents” (1976: 5). I do not think that Bentian ancestorship is as restrictively rooted in “filial piety” or parent-child relationships, nor that it is essentially the guilt over “suppressed hostility” inherent in such (or other) relationships which Bentian beliefs and actions relating to ancestors primarily expresses. However, with Fortes, and Tylor (1920) and Freud (1952) before him, I share the view of relations with the ancestors as extensions of important social relationships in the family or society. Dreams about and soul theft by dead relatives, and the commonly arranged soul searches to the afterworldly abodes of *liau* and *kelelungan*, perhaps most clearly exemplify the importance of lived relations for Bentian relations with the dead. But there is also a connection between the importance of the dead in this predominantly malevolent guise, and their importance as ancestors in the sense of respected and predominantly benevolent beings providing assistance and well-being. Relations with both categories express the importance that the dead had for people while they were alive. In addition, as noted above, mortuary ceremonies and concerns with honoring the dead facilitate contact with them at a later stage in a capacity as potent and benevolent ancestor spirits.

22 The *tempuun*, as noted by Hopes et al. (1997: 4), represent the most salient and formalized expression of this imperative to acknowledge and trace back, step by step, the origins or associated “ownership” of practices and things in rituals. As they also note, some *tempuun* are mere genealogies, and it is often this aspect of them which is regarded by the *belians* as their most essential part. The fact that some *tempuun* are regarded as older (*tuha*) than others and for that reason should precede others also expresses the importance of this idea, as does a more general concern with the correct order of ritual sequences. Beyond the *tempuun*, the significance of this imperative is exemplified by the recitation in *belian* and *wara* initiation rituals (*tumbang*) and other rituals of long lines of past teachers, and the recitation in various rituals of genealogies of spirits. A striking example from a non-ritual context is represented by the fact that many Bentians, when they initiated rattan cultivation around the turn of the twentieth century, brought rattan seeds from the relatively distant Pasir region (rather than take them from wild-growing plants in the forest) for the reason that rattan, according to mythology, originated there.

23 Alternative notions of the ancestral past exist. This model of history, which is something of an inversion of the modern Western myth of progress, is not un-

contested. The myth of progress, heralded by the New Order regime as a national project (and, before that, by other governments), has deeply influenced the Bentine, resulting in an ambivalent attitude to the ancestral past, many aspects of which they are ashamed of and refuse to acknowledge.

24 Fox (1993b: 1, 13) has coined the term “ritual attractor” for this kind of structures which he identifies as characteristic and emblematic of Austronesian houses (emblematic in the sense that a ritual attractor “represents, in concentrated form, the house as a whole”). For examples of such objects from various Austronesian societies, see Fox (1993a) and Waterson (1990). Most typically, these objects are represented by some kind of upright structures, and besides being commonly animated by spirits (often ancestral or ambiguously ancestral ones) they frequently provide a principal means of connection with the spirits and Gods of the upperworld.

25 As I have argued elsewhere, these rituals are essentially about concentration: of souls, potency, and participants (Sillander 2004: 230). Holding a *buntang* or *nalintaun* amounts to constructing a temporary center of ritual activity (e.g., a house or a village) where invited people and spirits gather. Within this ritual space the *longan* represents the inner center, the place where most of the most central ritual activities take place, and where potent domestic or local spirits congregate or are contacted. (By contrast, forest and foreign spirits, including those of the headhunt skull, tend to be addressed at the threshold of the main door.) The spirits contacted at the *longan* include the *belians*’ ancestral spirit familiars (part *gaib*, part *kelelungan*), *naiyu* and *kelelungan* protecting spirits of the house, village and its *sacra*, *naiyu* and other guardian spirits of the local environment, early mythological figures and various heavenly spirits charged with overseeing different aspects of the social, natural, or cosmic order, or particular procedures in the ritual.

26 Anonymity prominently characterizes *kelelungan* when addressed as protecting spirit (*pengiring*) in curing and *buntang* rituals. In respect to *liau* addressed in the capacity as unwanted guest or potential intruder in the affairs of the living, this usually also holds true, especially for the relatively recent *liau*, although some ancient *liau*, associated with the first human and prehuman beings and some mythological ancestors, are sometimes individually mentioned. When invited to secondary mortuary rituals, however, both *liau* and *kelelungan*, and especially their recent representatives, are often addressed individually by name, and this also pertains to *kelelungan* when invoked as spirit helper (*mulung*) of the ritual experts. This is true also for *liau* and *kelelungan* when addressed as potential soul thieves in *buntangs*, although when addressed as such in a more cursory fashion in curing and harvest rituals it is usually not.

27 The currently common practice of keeping written genealogies to ancestors frequently pertains to ancestors who first opened up a particular plot or area for swidden cultivation, or who planted or first found particular fruit or honey trees.

This reflects the increasing practical significance of these ties, and the fact that use rights to such forest resources are traced genealogically (bilaterally).

28 As an example of this tendency whereby prominent individuals erected *longans* and their skulls became ancestor skulls, we may mention three siblings, all *manti*, who erected a *longan*, which was later moved from the multi-family house where they lived to another, and from there to the village longhouse which represented my fieldwork base, in which their skulls formed three of this house's ancestor skulls (and most of the others had belonged to their direct descendants). This was presumably also the case with many of the often relatively famous leaders whose skulls were stored by the *longan* of the *lou solais* of other Bentian villages, although I did not obtain information about who had constructed these *longans*.

29 Although possibly particularly great for the Bentian and some of their Luangan neighbors, such a multi-faceted socially integrative significance of the remains and objects associated with the ancestors is not limited to these groups. Even though the *longan* may be unique to them, the skulls and objects associated with particular ancestors play, or played, a similar role for houses or communities among other Luangans and south Borneans who did not have this institution. This was presumably the case at least for those Dusuns and Lawangans who stored ancestor skulls in their houses (cf. Sarwoto 1963: 27–28, Weinstock 1983: 124–125). However, it probably applied also to those of these groups who kept skulls, in correspondence with more common Bornean practice, in outdoor bone ossuaries. Among some Dusuns and Lawangans, ossuaries (*kariring*) containing the skulls of the ascendants of leaders served, according to Mallinckrodt (1927: 559), as village offering places (*dorpsofferplaats*), presumably in an analogous way to how such skulls and the *longan* serve as foci for Bentian community rituals (*nalin taun*). Among the Uut Danum and Ngaju, who did not usually use bone ossuaries or ancestor skulls in these ways, ancestors appear to have an equivalent significance by way of the *tojahan* offering places, located in villages or near old settlements in the forest, which were established by prominent ancestors and contain stones and wooden effigies metonymically associated with them (Couderc, this volume). Among the Ma'anyan, those ancestors who would “return” as *nanyu* to spirit houses in the rafters of multi-family houses also performed this role, even though the skulls were absent in this case. Notable in this case is the fact that these spirit houses, like the *longan*, were moved from old to new family houses, and that new family houses were dependent for ritual purposes on the origin houses from which they had broken off, until they acquired *nanyu* and spirit houses of their own (Hudson 1972: 57–60). Similar relations, expressed in a botanical idiom of precedence between origin and branch houses (and mediated by the *longan* in the Bentian case), or between other analogously conceptualized residential units (villages, or longhouse compartments), appear formerly to have been widespread in Borneo (cf. Sather 1993: 75–78, Winzeler 1996: 3). The Iban central house post (*tiang pemun*), and the *ubat penchelap* (“cooling charms”) at-

tached to it, seem to have played a somewhat similar role to the Bentian *longan* complex (encompassing the ancestor skulls and the ancestral objects) (Barrett and Lucas 1993: 584, Sather 1993: 72–75, 1996: 85, 2001: 78–79).

30 Membership in social groups based on descent traced from the groups' founders or former leaders seems to have been a widespread phenomenon in southeast Borneo and possibly much of the rest of the island too. In the early twentieth century, Mallinckrodt (1927: 553) noted that "a large part of the villages in the Barito river basin are descent group villages," that is, villages whose inhabitants trace descent from particular origin and predecessor villages (and their leaders). In Sarawak, Leach (1950: 61) observed that "political authority . . . rested with a small group of related families the members of which had a more direct linkage to the ancestral founders of the house (or village) than other members of the community." Mallinckrodt even proposed that the original "tribal organization" (*stamindeeling*) in the Barito area had a genealogical basis in that villages were divided into systematically inter-marrying sections recognizing different origins.

31 As examples of groups originating from ancestors who were originally heavenly spirits that descended to earth we may mention a Bentian group founded by Sepatung Taun, an ancestor who originated as an anthropomorphic effigy that fell down from heaven in the midst of a rice field during sowing (*ngasek*), and some Benuaq groups who trace their origin from Seniang Jatu, descended near Mount Pararawen near Muara Teweh on the Barito, and some other Benuaq groups that originate from Ngingka Olo on the lower Mahakam.

32 This situation parallels the situation in rural Imerina, Madagascar (and elsewhere), where particular prominent individuals in a similar way constitute the pivots of social life both during and after life (Graeber 1995: 267). In both cases, the social organization could be described as ego-centered, in the sense that it is through the agency of, or with reference to, particular leaders or other ambitious individuals (who are influential in this respect, albeit in different ways, both when alive and dead) that particular extended families, houses and communities are organized.

33 An indication that a conceptual continuum between elders and ancestors, as proposed by Kopytoff for sub-Saharan Africa, may be a widespread Indo-Malaysian phenomenon is the fact that terms designating grandparents are often the principal terms for ancestors in the region (see, e.g., Appleton and Sather, this volume, and Coville 2002: 86).

34 When people traced "descent" from these leaders they would go back to their siblings or other collateral relatives (or the descendants of these relatives) (cf. Keesing 1971). However, it may be noted that, even though this testifies to the conditionality of descent strictly defined, it simultaneously testifies to a tendency to reckon descent, evidenced also, for example, by the practice of tracing landrights bilaterally.

35 People storing ancestor skulls or using them in rituals do not need to be directly lineally descended from them and skulls may even be borrowed for ritual use by unrelated families. This was the case in the *lou* where I mostly stayed where the skulls were not ascendants of the family who owned it, and where several different families employed them for ritual purposes. In a structural sense, this situation is analogous to that in Japan where all the dead relatives of the members of a household or house (*ie*) – rather than just the ancestor of a particular lineage – are subject to ancestor worship (Kerner 1976). As another example of such “genealogical flexibility,” those in a Bentian community who invoke its living leaders or celebrated ancestors often include people with no genealogical links to them. When someone becomes a “communal ancestor” – and this has a more or less universal significance – the reasons for his importance obviously go beyond kinship, and such ancestorship is no longer essentially genealogical but rather “sociological.” (Or, if we adopt a more narrow, genealogical definition of ancestorship, we could say that such individuals are no longer just ancestors, but predecessors in a more generalized sense.)

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CHAPTER 2

Recalling the Dead, Revering the Ancestors: Multiple Forms of Ancestorship in Saribas Iban Society

Clifford Sather

THE SARIBAS IBAN EXPRESS THEIR reverence for the ancestors in various ways, ranging from simple farming prayers to major ritual festivals in which the spirits of the dead are recalled to the living world. Lengthy genealogies connect the ancestors, not only to their living descendants, but to the gods and spirit-heroes as well, while myths credit them, as a consequence, with the creation of major social institutions.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the varied ways in which ancestorship is manifested in Saribas Iban society. Much of this variation, I argue here, is linked to the complex manner in which death is played out in Saribas funerary rituals.¹ Within these rituals, as I have noted elsewhere (Sather 2003b), death takes the form of a transformational process in which different aspects of the self are said to experience the conditions of death in different ways, and so, in practice, are made, sequentially, the focus of separate rituals. As a process, death is also seen as ontologically inseparable from life. Hence the 'souls' (*semengat*) of the dead undergo an eventual transubstantiation through which they become re-embodied as rice and so are associated, ultimately, with the gift of sustenance and of human life itself. On the other hand, in death, an individual is also said to become a 'spirit' (*antu*), which in time undergoes an even more complex transformation. Identified at first with the corpse, this spirit becomes increasingly invisible and withdrawn from the material world, until, during the culminating rites of the funerary process, it is temporarily recalled, together with the spirits of an entire generational cohort of the

dead, back to the principal site of its former existence, the longhouse of its living descendants. Here, through a display of material objects evoking its former presence, these spirits of the most recent longhouse dead participate in a ritual exchange by which they renew and strengthen the lives of the living while they themselves undergo a final transition, shedding the last traces of their former materiality, to become benevolent, otherworldly ancestors. From what is now a realm of their own, removed both spatially and visually from the living world, they henceforth play a role in the lives of the living analogous to and ultimately merging with that of the 'gods' (*petara*).

Iban society was in the past, and remains today, at once both egalitarian and intensely competitive. Death in this connection reverses a basic premise of the Saribas Iban normative order, namely, that at birth each person is, by basic entitlement, both 'equal' (*sama*) and 'alike' (*sebaka*). Death rituals, by contrast, instantiate social and spiritual differentiation. Those who fail in life by dying prematurely, or by suffering 'ill-fated deaths' (*busong mati*), are precluded from ritual recall and so, in this sense, are debarred after death from achieving full ancestorship. Indeed, they may become a temporary source of this-worldly danger. On the other hand, those who succeeded in life are memorialized with special honors and so secure for themselves a place of eminence both in the hereafter and in this world in the oral genealogies preserved by their living descendants. Hence, their personal achievements live on in both this world and the next. In addition, some persons, in becoming ancestors, elect to return to the living world as the personal spirit-guardians (*tua'*) of especially favored descendants. In doing so, they are believed to act in ways that serve to perpetuate intergenerational success along particular family lines. Finally, those who achieve singular renown in life may be given funerary rites modeled not on those of ordinary human beings, but on those of the ancestral spirit-heroes. Their bodies, rather than being buried, are entombed above ground, and following the dissolution of their fleshly remains, they are said to undergo a direct, this-worldly apotheosis, becoming not otherworldly gods, but, rather, immanent spirit agents in the living world.

Finally, the nature of ancestorship varies, too, with the particular social capacities for which the ancestors are evoked by the living, whether as named individuals, regional pioneers, sources of political or spiritual authority, family or community founders, or simply as eponymous *aki'-ini'* (grandfathers-grandmothers).

The Saribas Iban

The Iban are the most populous Dayak group in western Borneo. The great majority live in Sarawak, where, in 2001, they numbered 603,540, or just over a quarter of the state's population (Sather 2004: 623).² The particular community I discuss in this chapter, the Saribas Iban, historically inhabited the Saribas and Krian river systems in what is now the Betong Division. Over the last 40 years the region has experienced considerable out-migration and today many Saribas Iban are also present elsewhere, particularly in towns and urban areas. Most of my observations come from the upper Paku tributary of the main Saribas River where I have carried out fieldwork intermittently from 1977 to the present.³

In the past and continuing into the first decade of the twentieth century, warfare was a central focus of much of Saribas Iban ritual life. The most preeminent of all ritual festivals constituted a graduated cycle known as the *Gawai Burong* (Sandin 1977). These festivals invoked the most powerful of all Iban deities, Singalang Burong, the Iban god of warfare and augury, and were sponsored by men of prowess, accomplished warriors, and war leaders, in an ascending sequence, with each stage marking an increasing degree of honor and social recognition (see Sather 1996: 95–96). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the preeminence of warfare began to fade as organized resistance to Brooke rule gradually came to an end. At the same time, ambitious men found new avenues of social advancement, especially in sojourning abroad (*bejalai*). Traveling to the Malay Peninsula and beyond, Saribas men found profitable employment in the colonial economies of the region, particularly as policemen and forest-produce traders. Later, returning sojourners introduced commercial agriculture and by the turn of the century rubber planting in particular brought about a brief period of unparalleled economic prosperity (Cramb 2007: 173 ff.). Financed by this newfound wealth, Saribas ritual and artistic life underwent a spectacular, if brief, florescence.

As substantial amounts of money flowed into ritual celebrations, the nature of these rituals changed. The dominant *gawais* of the past, which centered chiefly on warfare, hill-rice farming, healing, and traditional, non-monetary forms of wealth, were gradually supplanted by a comparatively new ritual that emerged sometime in the nineteenth century. This ritual was called the *Gawai Antu*, or 'Spirit Festival'. Like the *Gawai Burong*, it, too, gave, and continues to give, public recognition to personal achievement.

Male prowess continues to receive special honor, but now recognition is also accorded to women and to other avenues of renown, including travel and, today, financial success, government office, and politics. But in contrast to the *Gawai Burong*, the *Gawai Antu* valorizes status retrospectively, after death, and not individually, but collectively, as the members of an entire generational cohort of dead are simultaneously recalled to this world, feasted, and through a ritual of both separation and remembrance are merged with the long-dead and so recreated as ancestors.

During the 1920s, Iban in the lower Saribas took enthusiastically to mission schooling and many adopted Christianity. Initially, conversion had little impact on ritual, but following Malaysian independence the situation changed dramatically, especially as the rural economy declined and many younger families abandoned longhouse living and moved to urban areas. Since the 1970s, nearly all Saribas Iban have become Christians and many features of traditional religion have been abandoned. The *Gawai Antu*, however, remains an exception, and today hundreds of persons continue to gather in the Saribas, many now coming from outside the region, as each year different longhouse communities carry out these costly rituals out of obligation to the dead and in honor of their more remote ancestors of the past. In doing so, the *Gawai Antu* has taken on new meaning, reaffirming through its invocation of local ancestors ties of place and kinship and the continuing value of the longhouse as a source of ethnic identity for what is now an increasingly dispersed and economically heterogeneous community.⁴

Ancestors, Gods, Spirits, and Spirit-Heroes

The Saribas Iban, like most Borneo people (cf. Sellato 2002: 13), have no term that refers specifically to ancestors. All genealogical forebears, whether living or dead, near or remote, are called collectively *aki'-ini*, meaning, literally, 'grandfathers-grandmothers'.⁵ The term thus refers, literally, to grandparents, but also encompasses all genealogical forebears, whether living or dead, and so makes no distinction between "forebears" and "deceased ancestors."⁶ Distant forebears who are no longer alive can be distinguished from living grandparents only by the addition of special terms, such as *ke dulu' kelia*, 'of former times/long ago'.

At one level, this usage suggests a perception of continuity, and, indeed, many Iban say that the same ties of respect and nurturance that exist between

the young and their living grandparents should apply as well to those between the living and their deceased forebears. However, at another level, death, as we shall see, initiates a major transformation of these relationships.

Thus, as Wadley (1999: 599) notes, in practical terms, when addressing prayers or making offerings, the Iban refer to their dead ancestors not as *aki'-ini*, but, rather, as either *antu* or *petara* (also pronounced *betara*). It is customary to translate the term *antu* as 'spirits' and *petara* as 'gods' (see Richards 1981: 13, 281, Sather 1994a: 30). However, when referring to benevolent supernaturals, that is to say, those that are said to 'help' (*nulong*) human beings, the two terms are often used interchangeably (cf. Masing 1997: 18). Thus the *petara*, as 'gods', may also be described as *antu* (see also Béguet in this volume). In reference to the human dead, the latter are called, more specifically, *antu Sebanan*, or 'spirits of the afterworld'. In prayers (*sampi*), the Iban regularly address their ancestors as *petara*, and in making offerings they regularly include dead ancestors, sometimes referring to them specifically as *aki'-ini petara*, 'grandfather-grandmother gods' (Sather 2003b: 237). In these latter instances, the ancestors typically go unnamed.

The gods and ancestors are also closely linked in Iban mythology. Thus, both the gods (*petara*) and spirit-heroes (*Orang Panggau*) are said to have once lived as one with human beings (*mensia*) in 'this world' (literally, *dunia tu*). Like the historical Iban, both were travelers. In time, first the gods and then the spirit-heroes quarreled among themselves and departed, the gods migrating to the 'sky' (*langit*),⁷ the spirit-heroes to a raised world (called *Panggau-Libau*) midway between this world and the upperworld of the gods (see Sather 1994a: 31–33). In migrating to the sky, many of the gods took on cosmic attributes and so became associated with particular spheres of activity such as rice farming, healing, or the acquisition of material wealth. As Béguet (in this volume) notes, in doing so, they came to mediate relations with the natural world and so, in appearing to human beings, often manifest themselves as animals or birds. Otherwise, however, they remain human-like in form and personality, although they possess extra-human powers, notably that of metamorphosis (Sather 2008: 57–58).⁸ Although now spatially separated from humankind, as anthropomorphic beings the gods and spirit-heroes continue to communicate and in various ways influence human affairs. The spirit-heroes act essentially as exemplary models of human conduct and during major *gawai* festivals they intercede on behalf of the human celebrants as ritual hosts of the gods (Sather 1994a: 31, 1996: 98–99). The gods, for their part, transmit to the ancestors major elements

of *adat* (see Sather 1994a: 34–41). Thus, for example, Endu' Dara Tinchin Temaga, the youngest daughter of Singalang Burong, came to the earth and married an Iban ancestor named Menggin by whom she bore a son, Sera Gunting, the most famous of all Iban culture heroes. In coming of age, Sera Gunting traveled to the sky where he met his grandfather, Singalang Burong, who instructed him in the rules of augury and the arts of warfare. These Sera Gunting then introduced to the Iban (Sandin 1980: 95–99). Significantly, many present-day Saribas Iban can trace their genealogies to Sera Gunting and to other early ancestors and so, through them, to the gods themselves.

In the course of the *Gawai Antu*, the spirits of the recent dead, as *antu Sebayan*, join those of the long-dead in Sebayan and so are merged in a vaguely defined category of otherworldly *petara* (Sather 2003b: 180).⁹ In the process they lose their individuating attributes and so become, particularly in the context of prayers and offerings, what Kenneth Sillander (this volume) describes as an “anonymous totality.” In their capacity as “agencies capable of bestowing blessings and well-being on the living,” they are addressed, not individually, but simply as *petara*.¹⁰ In other contexts, however, the ancestors preserve their individuality, and, in the very process of becoming *petara*, their differentiating attributes and this-worldly achievements are, as we shall see, both celebrated and inscribed in memory.

While the terms *antu* and *petara* may be used interchangeably, there is also an important difference. All *antu*, including the *antu Sebayan*, have a potential for malevolence, that is to say, are capable, the Iban say, of ‘doing harm’ (*nganu*), whereas the *petara*, by contrast, ‘cannot but be good’ (*petara nadai enda' manah*, cf. Masing 1997: 19). In this connection it is significant to note that not all human dead are installed in Sebayan proper. The spirits of those who were stillborn, who died in infancy, or who suffered sudden or ill-fated deaths, by drowning, for example, or in childbirth, warfare, or by suicide are confined to special domains located just at the borders of Sebayan (cf. Sather 1978: 329–330). Here, their spirits are beyond the ritual recall of the living and so are thought by many to be precluded from full ancestorship. During the brief period that immediately follows death, their spirits, much more so than those of persons who died ordinary deaths, are said to become vengeful and malevolent. Particularly feared, for example, are the spirits of women who died in childbirth; known as *antu koklir*, they prey especially upon men, in extreme instances killing them by castration (see Sather 1978). Gradually, however, like other spirits of the dead, those of the ill-fated dead vanish,

too, to their own special domains at the borders of Sebeyan, and so cease to exist in the living world.¹¹

There are, however, two comparatively rare exceptions. The first of these are the spirits of persons who, while alive, allied themselves with forest demons known as *antu gerasi*. At night, the souls of such persons are thought to join the *antu gerasi* as they hunt down straying human souls, which the spirits pursue as game animals.¹² In death, such persons may be transformed directly into *antu gerasi* themselves. Their spirits, rather than journeying to Sebeyan, remain in this world, living generally solitary lives like other *antu gerasi*, deep in the forest or on mountain tops (Sather 2001: 66–67).¹³ The others are typically men of prowess who in death are said to return to the living world as spirit-animals, for example, as crocodiles, orangutans, barking deer, snakes, or clouded leopards, or as powerful mythic beings such as *nabau* water serpents. As such, these spirits sometimes enter into relationships with living human beings by becoming their *tua*’, or personal guardian-spirit. In some instances, as we shall see, *tua*’ relations are specifically associated with ancestorship. In most cases, however, the relationship is of a more generalized kind and those aided, or who seek their aid, are not necessarily descendants or even kin.¹⁴

Life, Death, and the Regeneration of Life

The Saribas Iban, like other indigenous peoples of insular Southeast Asia, share features of a common Austronesian conceptual heritage including, in this connection, “a belief in the immanence of life and in the interdependence of life and death” (Fox 1987: 523). As Fox states, writing generally of this heritage, since life is thought to depend upon death, “the ancestral dead or specific deceased persons, whose lives were marked by notable attainments, [are] regarded as capable of bestowing life-giving potency. Thus the dead figure prominently in the religious activities of the living” (1987: 525).

And so it is with the Iban. Moreover, the experiential conditions of life and death are believed to interpenetrate. Thus, an individual, while still alive, may directly experience aspects of death, such as soul loss (*semengat ngeluah*), bodily unconsciousness (*luput*), or the withering of his or her plant-image (*bungai layu*) (see Sather 2003b: 179–182). Hence, there is a fundamental sense of continuity. Conversely, the dead, too, may continue to communicate, and in other ways involve themselves with the living. A person wishing to make contact with a deceased parent may, for example,

wrap himself in an appropriately patterned ritual cloth before going to sleep at night. In doing so, he makes himself 'visible' (*nampak*) to the dead, and so, out of compassion, they may appear and converse with him in dreams (*mimpi*). Similarly, the souls of those who are very old are said to pass much of their time in the afterworld, where the conditions of life closely resemble those of this world. Such persons are often described as *setengah antu*, 'half spirits', or *setengah mensia*, *setengah antu*, 'half human-being, half spirit'. Hence, for the Iban, the realities of death are said to be close at hand and are never entirely veiled from the living.¹⁵

In this regard, some say that the dead do not really depart from this world at all, but that Sebayán is, in actuality, an inverted realm that exists beneath the floor of the longhouse (see Sather 1993: 111 n.42). Thus, at night, the spirits of the dead may sometimes be heard as they go about their daily affairs, night in this world being day in Sebayán. For this reason, too, the living, before eating, often drop small bits of food through the floor of the longhouse as a share for the dead. Similarly, when asked by a host to drink rice wine, it is customary for the drinker to first pronounce a formula, 'Give the ancestors drink' (*meri' petara ngirup*), and then to pour a small amount of wine through the floor slats, before drinking himself (see also Wadley 1999: 599).

This sense of the interpenetration of life and death is related, in turn, to a conception of the self as composed of interrelated but distinct components, each participating in the conditions of life and death in somewhat different ways. Thus, death, when it occurs, is characterized not by a radical rupture, but by a gradual dissolution of these separable components and their independent transformation (see Sather 2003b).

The cessation of breathing (*abis seput*) signals the beginning of this dissolution. Some say that the breath (*seput* or *nyawa*), as a source of life, inhabits the veins, together with the blood (Sather 2001: 50–55). At death, these and other elements of the body (*tuboh*), including the bones, are said to return to earth (*tanah*), the medium from which they were created. As earth, these elements are said to be repeatedly remolded and reforged by Selampandai ('All-Clever'), the Iban god of human creation, who, as a blacksmith, fashions bodies at his forge (Sather 2001: 105–108). Hence, new bodies are continually being refashioned from those of the dead, as the earthly substance of which they are composed is constantly recycled.

The 'soul' (*semengat*), on the other hand, in contrast to the body, is 'not extinguished' (*enda' abis*) when breathing ceases, but, rather, is said to

‘remain alive’ (*bedau idup*). At death, however, it leaves the body, until then its principal container, and journeys to Sebayan.¹⁶ Indeed, most say it begins this journey three days before breathing stops. On the fourth day, as it enters Sebayan, breathing ceases, the blood stops circulating, and the body begins to decompose (Sather 2001: 55–58). In Sebayan, the human soul lives on for a time, passing through additional deaths and rebirths. It does not live in Sebayan forever, however, nor is it reborn back into this world. Instead, after, some say, seven rebirths, the *semengat* dissolves into a watery mist; and in this form it returns to the living world where it condenses and falls to the earth as dew (*ambun*). As dew, particularly in the cool early morning hours of the dry season when new rice shoots first begin to appear, it is said to be absorbed into and to nourish the young rice plants, causing them to grow and bear grain. As dew, the residual soul stuff of the ancestors thus returns to the living world, where, re-incorporated as rice, it sustains the living as the Iban’s primary source of subsistence. In annual farming rituals Saribas families thus describe their rice crop, literally and spiritually, as ‘our ancestors’ (*padi aki’-ini’ kami*) (Sather 1994b: 119).¹⁷ Rice cultivation is similarly described as *jalai idup*, our ‘way of life’, or even, as *pengidup*, ‘life itself’. In cultivating rice, families say that ‘we follow our ancestors’ (*nunda ke aki’-ini’ kami*). Hence, rice and its cultivation are ancestral gifts that, together, make human life possible (Sather 1994b).

Besides the soul, each individual is also comprised of a ‘plant-image’ (*bungai*, also *bunga* or *ayu*).¹⁸ This image is said to exist separately from the body in the form of a bamboo or banana plant that grows in a clump from a common rootstock (*pun bungai*) together with the *bungai* of other family members. In the literature, the *bungai* is sometimes described as a “secondary soul” or “soul-counterpart” (cf. Freeman 1970: 21). However, in contrast to the *semengat*, which I have here glossed as ‘soul’, the *bungai* mirrors an individual’s outward state of bodily health and mortality. In good health the *bungai* grows and flourishes, while in ill health it withers (*nyadi layu*), and in death, dies (*parai*). As an encompassing life image, the *bungai* thus reflects the state of both the body and the soul. For example, if the soul is absent from the body, one ‘feels withered’ (*berasai nyadi layu*). Similarly, if the *bungai* is ill, scorched by heat, or overgrown with weeds, the body and soul suffer. With bodily death, the *bungai* perishes. However, unless this death results in a family’s extinction (*punas*), something greatly dreaded by the Iban, the family’s collective rootstock lives on, capable of generating new *bungai* (Sather 2001: 61, 2003b: 218).

Finally, at the time of death, an individual is said 'to become a spirit' (*nyadi antu*). This spirit is identified at first with the deceased's now lifeless body. Thus, burial is described, literally, as 'burying the spirit' (*numbak ka antu*) or as 'sending the spirit to the cemetery' (*nganjong antu ke pendam*) (Sather 2003b: 180, fn.). But the *antu* also has an immaterial existence that persists after burial. For a time, the newly deceased's spirit is said to linger in this world. Here its presence is perceived in negative terms, as a menace to the living and a continuing drain upon its family's rice stores and other resources. Reflecting this change, its appearance during this time is said to become increasingly demon-like (see Sather 2003b: 199). Eventually, however, the spirits of the great majority of the dead leave this world and, like the souls, journey to Sebuyan.

Shamans as Ancestors

In this there is, however, one major exception. While the souls and spirits of the ordinary dead are believed to travel downriver (*kili*) to Sebuyan, those of dead shamans (*manang*) travel, by contrast, upriver (*kulu*), to a separate afterworld of their own located on the summit of Mount Rabong (Sather 1993: 91, 2001: 37). In Sebuyan, the ordinary dead are believed to live along an invisible river known as the Mandai, or *Mandai Mati*, 'the Mandai River of the Dead'. Like a number of other Borneo peoples, the Iban believe that this river has a visible counterpart in the living world, also known as the Mandai, or *Mandai Idup*, 'the Mandai River of the Living', which, in this case, is a southern tributary of the Kapuas in West Kalimantan. Mount Rabong, too, has a visible counterpart, but its location is less certain.¹⁹ From their abode at the summit of Mount Rabong, the spirits of ancestral shamans play a notably different role than the spirits of ordinary ancestors. While the latter are concerned with renewing and strengthening the lives of the living, the former are more specifically involved in the ritual work and initiation of living shamans. Thus during curing rituals, they are regularly invoked by the *manang* as spirit companions. Many shamans take the name of an ancestral shaman as their shamanic title (*julok*), and some of these spirits act as personal spirit-helpers (*yang*).²⁰ The top of Mount Rabong is said to be directly accessible to the upperworld, particularly to the home of the shamanic gods Menjaya and his sister, Ini' Inda. According to myth, Ini' Inda initiated the first human shamans on the top of Mount Rabong. Since then, unseen, she carries out these same rites there as novice shamans

simultaneously undergo initiation (*bebangun*) in this world (Sather 2001: 29–32). In the process, the ancestral shamans assist as spirit companions and bestow upon the newly initiated novices charms and ritual paraphernalia.

The Ritual Passage from Death to Ancestorhood

The passage to ancestorhood is, as I have stressed, closely linked to the Saribas funerary process. Unlike some Borneo societies (Hertz 1960, Metcalf 1982), the dissolution of the body is without ritual elaboration and takes place independently of the transformations that affect other elements of the self. Once death occurs, the body is buried within two or three days at most, and is never, as a rule, exhumed or re-interred (Sather 2003b: 186). Nonetheless, Saribas funerary rituals are protracted and unfold in stages, with each stage centering on a different component of the self – the soul, plant-image, and spirit.

During the initial rites of death called *rabat* (or *nyenggai' antu*), the primary focus is on the *semengat*. During a nightlong vigil, family members and other mourners gather around an enclosure containing the deceased's body. Seated within this enclosure, a female dirge-singer (*tukang sabak*) sings the *sabak*, a long narrative lament that describes the soul's journey to Sebeyan.²¹ As described in the words of the *sabak*, before this journey begins, spirits of the deceased's dead ancestors gather just outside the longhouse and, together with the *tukang sabak*'s soul, accompany the soul of the newly deceased to its place on the Mandai River of the Dead (Sather 2003b: 187–191).

As soon as the *sabak* concludes, the body is removed from the longhouse and buried. Burial is followed by a period of mourning (*ulit*) (Sather 2003b: 192–205), ending with a second ritual that now focuses on the *bungai* or 'plant-image'. This is called the *besserara' bungai* (or *bunga*) and is performed by a *manang* (Sather 2003a, 2003b: 205–218). *Besserara'* means, literally, 'to sever' 'separate', or 'cut away'. What is cut away in this case is the now dead *bungai* represented in the ritual by the branch of a freshly-cut plant stalk, usually bamboo. At the climax of the ritual, the *manang* severs this branch and casts it away with offerings for the dead. Simultaneously, the deceased's now dead *bungai* is said to be severed from its invisible rootstock by the god Selampandai. With this act of separation, the vitality of the surviving family is safeguarded. At the same time, room is made on the still-living rootstock for the appearance of new *bungai* (Sather 2001: 326). In the accompanying

narrative song, the *manang* describes how various foodstuffs and objects of family wealth are divided with the deceased, whose share the *antu Se-bayan* carry back with them when they return to Sebayán (see Sather 2001: 334–349, 2003b: 212–214). The effect of this division and of the removal of these objects is to efface the deceased's former social self and to undo the various material bonds that once connected him or her to other persons in the living world, including, in particular, other family members.²²

The *Gawai Antu*, as the final rite of the funerary process, focuses on the dead as *antu* or 'spirits'; hence its name. In contrast to the *rabat* and *bese-rara' bungai*, the *Gawai Antu* is a major community ceremony and performing it is an enormous economic burden. Hence, ideally, it is held only once in each generation, although, in actuality, it may be deferred even longer. Consequently, not only does the *gawai* memorialize the achievements of the recent dead, it also demonstrates the material success of their descendants and so, in performing it, reflects upon an entire community's reputation.

The *Gawai Antu* is described by Saribas elders as a rite of 'house building' (*berumah*) (cf. Sather 1993: 94 ff.). The house constructed is located, however, not in this world, but in Sebayán. Its construction is signified at the beginning of the *gawai* by the collection and fashioning of building materials and, at its conclusion, by the use of these materials to erect wooden tomb huts (*sungkup*) over the graves of each of the newly memorialized dead. During the first stage of the *gawai*, men prepare these materials, while women cut bamboo, which they split and peel into weaving materials. During the next stage, the women weave these materials into special cylindrical baskets called *garong*, while men erect altars (*rugan*) which are attached to the main passageway posts outside each family's apartment (cf. Sather 1993: 100). From these posts are also hung items of remembrance that formerly belonged to the dead, and each evening until the conclusion of the *gawai*, family members present food offerings at the *rugan* for the spirits of the dead.

The main *gawai* opens at dawn with a ceremonial reception of guests, beginning with the specially invited men of prowess, who, taking the role of warriors, will drink one or the other of two sacred rice wines at the climax of the ceremony. Invited guests are called *pengabang*. The same term is also used for the visiting spirits of the dead and the gods of Sebayán who come to attend the *gawai*. In marked contrast to the informality that otherwise characterizes everyday longhouse sociality, the reception of visitors and the major ceremonial events that follow are carefully structured according to

status, age, and gender. As in all traditional *gawais*, human hosts and guests assume the ceremonial roles of the spirit-heroes and gods, thus recreating in their seating and outward behavior a numinous world of idealized hierarchy that characterizes not only the realms of the gods and spirit-heroes, but also the Sebaran afterworld (cf. Sather 1996: 98–99). Accordingly, a major task of each family head is to *bedigir*, ‘to line up’ or ‘array in order’ the visitors he seats at his family’s section of the gallery. At major ritual junctures before feasting, oratory, or ritual processions, the *tuai gawai*, or principal festival leader, walks the length of the longhouse, notifying each family head to begin arranging his or her visitors in order of precedence. At other times, guests are free to move about and mingle informally with their kin and neighbors.

The welcoming of guests ends at sundown. After serving rice wine and an evening meal, the *tuai gawai* announces the beginning of the main rituals. These open with processions by the guests around the longhouse galleries accompanied by welcoming music (*ngalu petara*) played for the gods and spirits of Sebaran. Next, the men of prowess, in ceremonial dress with drawn swords, dance along the galleries to ‘open’ (*berandang*) and ‘fence’ (*ngelalau*) a ‘pathway’ (*jalai*) for the priest bards (*lemambang*), who, once this is done, begin their invocation of the dead.

From this point onward, the bards sing throughout the remainder of the night. As they sing, they move slowly forward in a continuously rotating motion, circumambulating, as they do so, the entire longhouse gallery. Their movements are said to mimic those of the traveling gods and spirits (cf. Sather 1993: 97–101).²³ Starting first in the *tuai gawai*’s apartment, the priest bards begin to sing of the coming of the gods and spirits, led by the principal gods and goddesses of Sebaran, who travel as married pairs, first Raja Niram and his wife Ini’ Inan, and then their daughter Dara Rambai Geruda and her husband Bujang Langgah Lenggah.²⁴ They are followed by others, and then by the spirits of the ancestors down through the most recent longhouse dead. The song relates that before the spirits of the dead take leave of Sebaran, they first pick charms to take for their *gawai* hosts. These charms are described as fruits that hang from the branches of a miraculous palm tree called the *Ranyai*.²⁵ Likened by some (see Heppell et al. 2005: 26) to the Iban “Tree of Life,” the *Ranyai* grows, paradoxically, not in the living world, but in Sebaran, where its fruits can only be collected by the dead. Left behind for their hosts, these fruits, as gifts from the dead, become a font of material prosperity, healing, and life-renewal, reaffirming, once again, the interdependence of life and death.



Figure 2.1. *Gawai Antu*. Priest bards singing the *timbang jalong*, circling as they move from one family's section of the gallery to the next. Ulu Bayor, Saribas, 1988. Note the modern dress – business shirts and ties.

With the departure of the dead from Sebayon, the bards, still singing, leave the *tuai gawai's* apartment and enter the gallery. Here, as they move from one family's section to the next, they narrate the journey of the spirits as they travel to this world (see Sather 1993: 98). As they sing, each bard carries a drinking cup (*jalong*) in the palm of his right hand, filled with rice wine (see Figure 2.1). During this singing, the wine is said to change color and acquire a magical potency so strong and lethal that only the brave may drink it. Shortly before dawn, as the invocation draws to a close, the dead arrive in the living world. In the words of the invocation, they are received with offerings, rice wine, cockfights, and songs of praise. At this point, each bard, as he finishes singing, hands his cup of *ai' jalong* to an elderly woman who sits facing one of the warriors at the center of the longhouse gallery. She then presents her cup, which the warrior receives, and, after first clearing it with the tip of his sword, drinks down with a loud war cry.²⁶

The next set of drinkers then destroys the *rugan* altars. For many, this is a poignant moment as it signals the impending departure of the dead. It is also a time of heightened danger. By inviting the dead directly into the public areas of the longhouse, the *Gawai Antu* temporarily dissolves



Figure 2.2. At the climax of the *Gawai Antu*, warriors are served sacred wine (*ai' garong*) by each participating family head from bamboo tubes inserted inside the *garong* baskets, one for each ancestor being memorialized. Ulu Bayor, 1988.

the boundaries that otherwise separate the living from the dead. As a consequence, the potential for calamity is enormous.²⁷ Thus, while the *gawai* enjoins a massive amount of feasting and drinking, the greater part of this occurs within a highly regulated setting, with publicly announced rules and carefully scheduled events in proper sequence, each signaled beforehand by the *tuai gawai*. Potential danger is thus managed through an explicit display of order, as events unfold in patterned sequence within a structured physical setting, consisting of ordered seating arrangements, processions, drinking ceremonies, chants, and organized feasting. It ends, if all goes well, with the return of the spirits of the dead to Sebayon and their merging with the long-dead in a separate otherworldly community of ancestors.

This display of order reaches its climax as contact with the dead intensifies, concluding with their arrival in the longhouse and the drinking of the sacred wines. Before the departure of the guests, both living and dead, a final morning meal is served of meat and rice wine. For the living, this is characteristically a joyous feast, with heavy drinking. Typically, many who have had little sleep since the *gawai* first began now become intoxicated.²⁸ Widows and widowers are released from mourning restrictions, and the dramatic climax of the *gawai* then follows: the drinking of the *ai' garong* wines. The hosts now form a series of processions to 'present the *garong*' (*nganjong garong*) to the most honored group of warriors. The first is led by the *tuai gawai*, who carries his family's *garong* baskets, each containing a bamboo tube filled with rice wine. After a series of mock combats, the drinkers receive the wine and drink it down with war cries (see Figure 2.2). The *ai' garong* is believed to be even more poisonous (*bisa'*) than the *ai' jalong*. Some bards, indeed, compare it to the *ai' limban* (or *beru*), the fluids that flow from a decomposing corpse (Sather 2003b: 236). After drinking repeatedly, the warriors vomit.

Peter Metcalf, in an essay entitled "The wine of the corpse" (1987), has drawn attention to the similarities that exist between the fermentation of rice wine and the process of bodily decomposition. In societies in Borneo that practice, or formerly practiced, secondary treatment of the dead, the decomposing corpse is typically placed, like cooked rice during wine fermentation, inside a jar from which fluids are drained through bamboo tubes. By analogy Metcalf likens the ritual use of these fluids to a figurative "drinking of the dead" (1987: 99), and in support of his argument, he points to the ritual wine-drinking of the *Gawai Antu* which he sees as a variant "Feast of the Dead." Here, however, wine-drinking appears to be less about "endocannibalism," as

he terms it, than it is about the transformation of the dead into future *petara*. There are, in fact, two rice wines that are consumed during the *Gawai Antu*, not simply one, as Metcalf implies, and both are closely associated with the dead. The first, the *ai' jalong*, is carried by the bards as they enact the journey of the dead to this world, while the second, the *ai' garong*, is placed inside the *garong* baskets, each of which is described as a "sign" or visible embodiment of the dead. During the *gawai* both wines become, like a decomposing corpse, corrupted and poisonous. Rice itself, as we have seen, is a material embodiment of the ancestors. As dew, it constitutes a transformation of the ancestors' soul stuff, just as rice wine, it might be said, constitutes a liquid transformation of rice. The return of the spirits of the dead enacted during the *gawai* reverses their original departure from this world and their corresponding passage from corpse-like materiality to an essentially immaterial existence as *antu Sebyan*. Their return thus reverses this passage, reintroducing a corpse-like materiality to the rice wine carried by the bards, which the act of drinking and displays of prowess, like the 'eating ill-omens' (*makai burong jai*) (Sather 1994a: xl–xli), serve to neutralize and so obliterate.²⁹

Journeys of Achievement and Remembering the Dead

Fox (1987: 526) argues that in the traditional religions of insular South-east Asia, "there is no presumption of identity attached to any of the manifestations of life. Creation produced myriad forms of being and . . . not even mankind is credited with a single origin or source of being." The result is "a celebration of spiritual differentiation," the premises of which, socially, "are conducive to notions of precedence and hierarchy."

Drawing on Fox's argument, Dimitri Tsintjilonis (2004) has shown how, in Sa'dan Toraja society, hierarchically-ranked "kinds of people" (nobles, commoners, and slaves) are each believed to have been created in a different manner and that these differences are "actuated" in funerary rituals through animal sacrifices. These rituals, moreover, much like the Iban *Gawai Antu*, act to obviate the experiential distance that separates the living from the dead so that, the Toraja say, the living can "think and feel the desires of the dead" (Tsintjilonis 2004: 381). In Saribas society, funerary rituals similarly celebrate social and spiritual differentiation. However, the differentiation they celebrate arises not from differences of origin, but from those of achievement. As Fox (1987: 526) notes, the same spiritual premises that favor hierarchy may equally well promote notions of achievement. In this regard,

a recurrent Austronesian image of human life, Fox observes, is that of a metaphorical “journey of achievement.” “Literally and spiritually, individuals are distinguished by their journeys. Rank, prowess, and the attainment of wealth can be taken as evident signs of individual enhancement in a life’s odyssey” (1987: 526). Moreover, this enhancement is typically celebrated at death in mortuary rituals and feasting, which not only define a person’s social and spiritual position, but serve as well “to translate this position into a similarly enhanced position in the afterlife” (1987: 526).

In contrast to the *Sādan* Toraja, a basic premise of Saribas Iban society is that each individual is alike at birth. But Saribas society is also intensely competitive. Personal achievement is highly valued and is judged to be a sign of both merit and spiritual favor. The outcome of competition is differentiation, a process likened by the Iban to the art of weaving (Sather 1996: 74). Just as each thread begins alike, in the end, after dyeing and weaving, it assumes a distinctive color and place within the resulting fabric. While some persons die prematurely, before they have had a chance to gain social recognition, or suffer ill-fated deaths and so achieve no enduring place as ancestors; for the great majority, *gawais*, most notably the *Gawai Antu*, constitute the principal occasions when differences of achievement are displayed, while death itself marks the point at which each person’s “journey of achievement” concludes. Thus, during *rabat*, the deceased’s life history is related and whatever success he or she achieved in life is publicly noted. On the basis of these achievements, the elders then fix the amount of the deceased’s *adat pematī*. Narrowly defined, *adat pematī* stipulates the fines to be levied on those who break mourning taboos. More generally, however, the amount represents a summation of the deceased’s accumulated social and spiritual worth, and the greater this worth, the larger the amount of *adat pematī* (Sather 1996: 100, 2003b: 193).

More significantly yet, this amount is remembered and, years later, determines the type of *garong* basket that is woven for the deceased during *Gawai Antu*. One basket is woven for each person who was old enough at the time of death to have been given a personal name (*orang ke benama*). Infants who die before being named receive only woven ‘playthings’ (*ayam*). Seven different *garong* designs are recognized, including one (called *gelayan*) to which everyone who bore a name, male, female, married, or unmarried, is entitled. The other six denote ascending levels of attainment. In the past, the highest status designs were reserved for male war leaders, warriors, regional chiefs, and, in the case of women, especially

accomplished weavers. The special importance of each *garong* basket is that its design directly expresses the deceased's personal achievements. In this regard, each basket, the Iban say, is a 'sign' (*tanda*) or material embodiment of the person for whom it was woven. It is not, in other words, a "symbol" – something standing for something else – but is, rather, a "concrete thing-in-itself" (cf. Gell 1975: 211), which similarly, as in this case of Sa'dan sacrificial offerings, "actualizes the significant attributes of particular persons in the context of their death" (Tsintjilonis 2004: 380).

By actuating these attributes, *ayam* and *garong* baskets, together with grave furnishings and the display of personal objects belonging to the dead, make it possible for those who participate in the *Gawai Antu* to recall the newly-absent dead and return them for a time to a renewed state of intimacy with the living. As Merleau-Ponty (1962: 18) observes, absence is signified, not so much by a sense of "nothingness" as by acts of seeing. The possibility of reproducing an absent object or person in memory requires more than simply conjuring up a mental image. The ability to recall relies on some aspect of present perception to be patterned in such a way as to sustain a resemblance to the absent object or person. In this case, the singular quality of these visible objects, most notably the *garong* baskets, and their unique association with the dead, allows memory to replace them with a perception of the dead themselves. As a consequence, those who gather to mourn a dead ancestor may, for a brief time at least, "relive" his or her past presence.

By reliving this presence, the Iban say that the *gawai* hosts are able to show that they share the grief that a dead person experienced in departing from this world. At the same time, they are also able to provide for the needs of the newly dead in Sebeyan, thus helping to make possible their eventual transformation into ancestors. The *gawai* guests, who are often affines or more distant kin, are similarly able to show, through their participation, that they, too, share in the grief of their *gawai* hosts. Thus, both grief and the celebration of personal achievement are collectivized and, by recalling the personal fate of individual family members, wider societal relationships are similarly brought alive and revitalized.

After the conclusion of the *Gawai Antu*, the *garong* baskets are carried to the cemetery where they are hung inside the tomb huts together with offerings and other objects meant for the use of the ancestors in Sebeyan. The spirits of the dead are said to take the *garong* back with them to the afterworld, where they not only denote but "actuate" their otherworldly

status. Hence, inequalities of achievement are replicated beyond this world. However, the ancestors, in departing, take their honors and achievements with them to the otherworld, and so leave their living descendants in this world free to embark on personal, status-enhancing life-journeys of their own devising (Sather 1996: 100–101). Hence, inequality in the afterworld helps sustain equality in this world. At the same time, the erection of tomb huts reconstitutes the spirits of the most recent cohort of longhouse dead as part of a permanent community of ancestors, now spatially differentiated and sufficiently independent from the living to be safely recalled in future *gawais* as temporary ritual visitors, precisely like the gods and spirit-heroes, or, among human beings, the members of a neighboring longhouse.

Like the mortuary sacrifices of the Toraja, the provision of *garong* baskets and tomb huts is described by the Iban as a way of ‘remembering’ (*ngingat*) the dead and sharing their feelings of grief. In the course of being provisioned, the ancestral dead are feasted and invited into the public areas of the longhouse to mingle with the living. In this way, for a brief while experiential distance is obviated and the living are made to feel that their dead forebears are present among them, not anonymously, but intimately, as individual visitors. Moreover, this presence is made tangible through the words and actions of the priest bards, warriors, and human guests. Among the dead, it is the most recent, whose former presence is still freshest in the memories of their *gawai* hosts, who are especially honored and whose presence is most intimately felt. By the time the sponsoring community holds another *Gawai Antu*, its present hosts will have traded places, becoming the next cohort of dead, dependent now upon a new generation of descendants to remember, and so to assure them a place among their ancestors appropriate to their this-worldly accomplishments. As Tsintjilonis says of Toraja mortuary rituals, efficacy in this case resides in remembering. Similarly, too, memories are embodied in objects, and by being remembered, the spirits of the dead are, in the end, empowered, and so become, for the Iban, as future *petara*, benevolent beings capable of answering prayers and so, in Fox’s terms, “of returning benefits to the living” (1987: 256). Until this takes place, the dead as spirits remain capable of doing harm and so, if their needs are unmet by the living, may beckon their souls to join them in Sebanan.

Oral Genealogies, Memory Specialists, Graves, and the Ancestors

The ancestors are remembered not only in the *Gawai Antu*, but also, in a more direct way, in oral genealogies. Persons who marry and bear children, that is to say, those who become potential ancestors, are seldom addressed by personal names (*nama*). Instead, teknonyms are customarily used. Personal names are of utmost importance, however, and, following death, it is largely by means of these names that deceased forebears are remembered, with oral genealogies providing the primary point of access to these memories.³⁰

The Saribas Iban keep lengthy oral genealogies, called *tusut*, of upwards to 30 or more generations (Sather 1994a: 47–57). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many of these genealogies have been written down in Romanized Iban and are often preserved today in family notebooks and even on websites. Except for early ancestors, most *tusut* consist primarily of personal names connected by *bebini diambi* ('took a wife') or *belaki diambi* ('took a husband') followed by *beranak ka* ('bore a child') (see Sather 1994a: 48). A distinctive feature of Iban *tusuts* is that ancestors are generally named in married pairs (*laki-bini*) and that genealogies are traced cognatically, through both men and women.

Lengthy mainline genealogies are described as *batang tusut*. From these, shorter branching or collateral lines are said to 'break off' (*mechah ari*). By using these shorter 'fragments' (*pechah tusut*), collateral kin and affines may connect themselves to one or several mainline genealogies. Consequently, *tusut* tend to be highly ramifying and, by analogy, are often likened by the Iban to a 'cast-net' (*jala*). Indeed, a second meaning of *tusut* is 'knotted' or 'entangled' (Richards 1981: 405). Every *tusut*, whatever its length, is traced to a founding ancestor, described as its *pun*, or 'source'. In practice, genealogies are closely bound up with processes of social reproduction and the acquisition and transmission of farmland and other valued resources. Thus, the terms "source" and "breaking off" apply also to family and longhouse succession, hiving-off, and to the acquisition and transmission of property (see Sather 1994a: 49–51). Within families and longhouses 'continuity' (*tampong*) is traced through a succession of *pun* (Sather 1993: 68–70), and in tracing these and other connections, individual ancestors are remembered not only by name, but also by the social roles they played in life, as community or family founders, pioneer settlers, or as sources of family heirloom wealth and reputation.

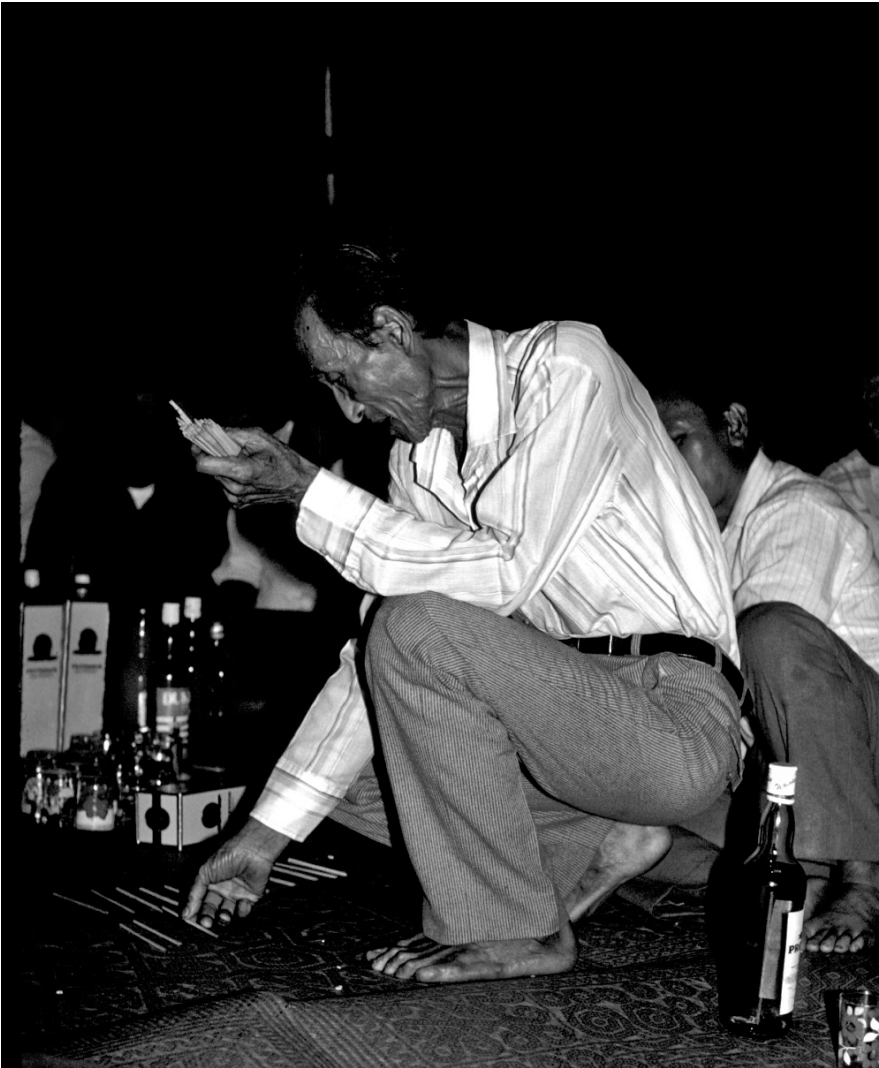


Figure 2.3. *Betusut*. Saribas genealogist (*tukang tusut*) reciting the genealogies of a couple during formal marriage negotiations, using cigarette leaves (*daun apong*) to indicate each generation removed from a common ancestor.

In the Saribas, persons who are recognized for their powers of memory and skill in reciting genealogies are called *tukang tusut*. Comprising a category of what Chambert-Loir and Reid (2002: xix) call “memory specialists,” the *tukang tusut* are expected to know not only their own genealogies, but also those of other families. They should also be familiar with local stories of the



Figure 2.4. Visiting the cemetery (at Batu Anchau, Ulu Paku, Saribas) and making offerings to the dead during *Gawai Dayak*, 1 June 1993.

past (*cherita lama*) and be able to relate these stories to the ancestors whose names appear in the *tusuts* (Sather 1994a: 52). The services of a *tukang tusut* are called upon in particular during marriage negotiations, when genealogies are often recited to determine the suitability of marriage partners (see Figure 2.3). Skilled genealogists are often the descendants of community founders, and in transmitting the *tusuts* they help maintain an important source of local authority and a form of community memory by which others may connect themselves to their ancestral origins. A knowledge of genealogies is also used at times to establish possible kinship connections with strangers.

In addition to genealogical ancestry, some ancestors are remembered as past 'elders' or 'leaders' (*tuai*) (see also Sillander in this volume). The Iban term *tuai* means both 'elder' as well as 'chief' or 'leader' (Richards 1981: 384–385). Here the relationship is not genealogical, but, rather, elders are evoked, often by name, as sources of local authority, exemplars of tradition, or persons of unusual prowess. Aside from public oratory, past *tuai* are often invoked in rituals. In opening major *gawai* ceremonies, the priest bards, for example, often begin by first 'arranging the elders in order' (*ngerintai tuai*), that is, calling them by name and inviting their attendance so that the proceedings may benefit from their presence (Sather 1994a: 62–63). As with

the Bidayuh (Geddes 1954: 26), these invocations are addressed widely, well beyond the local longhouse, and may include not only former Iban leaders (*tuai Iban*) of the Saribas, but also Saribas Malay leaders (*tuai Laut*), and even spirit-heroes (*tuai antu*) (Sather 1994a: 63).

Finally, the ancestors are also remembered through their graves. At the time of burial, objects belonging to the dead or meant for their use are often left on the grave, and later additional offerings may be placed there in response to dreams. In the past, the graves of prominent warriors often became vigil sites where ambitious men might spend the night to seek an encounter with the dead and so invite their possible spirit-guardianship. Traditionally, however, cemeteries were left covered in forest and even tomb huts were allowed to disintegrate. In recent years, however, efforts have been made to transform individual graves into permanent monuments. Today, grave sites are regularly cleared, often marked with wooden or concrete crosses, many bearing the names of the dead, and are frequently covered in cement, following a minor ritual, begun a half century ago, called the *Gawai Simen*, or 'Cement Festival'. In parts of the Saribas, these monuments have become increasingly elaborate and are now visited at least once a year, during *Gawai Dayak*, a state holiday that takes place in Sarawak on the first of June (see Figure 2.4).

The Ancestors as Guardian-Spirits

The funerary process ends in most cases, as we have seen, with the incorporation of the recent dead in a separate otherworldly community of ancestors. To achieve this end, the dead must first be remembered by being recalled to this world and feasted. But, by the same token, the dead, too, must remember the living. With bodily death and the departure of the soul, the deceased's spirit must first be persuaded to leave the living world. Thus, during *besebara' bungai*, special attention is given to severing the material connections that once bound the deceased to this world. But, at the same time, the deceased's spirit is asked not to forget the living. In a version of the *pelian besebara' bungai* that I recorded in 1977, the *manang* addressed the deceased in his song as follows (Sather 2001: 369):

We are parted like logs once joined to form a footbridge.
But you must continue to send us charms that cause us to be rich,
That bring us contentment and good health

So that we who continue this family may prosper in this world.

Shortly before this, after the severing of the plant-image, the deceased's spirit addresses the mourners through the *manang's* song, telling them (Sather 2001: 363):

When I am called for, I will appear in the form of a snake, part cobra,
part dragon.
Even though I have died and gone to the afterworld,
From there I will continue to watch over you, my precious children,
To help you become rich and successful, so that your name will be
famous.

What this last stanza refers to is an even more direct form of remembering. In this case, the spirit, although no longer present in this world, promises to return whenever its help is needed to act as a guardian-spirit or *tua'*. In entering this world, the *tua'* appears, literally, in the 'concealment' or 'container' (*karong*) of a snake (*ular*), here described by the *manang* as "part cobra, part dragon," but, in the Saribas at least, usually as a python (*sawa*) or, less often, a cobra (*tedong*). Hence, such spirits are also known, in addition to *tua'*, as *antu ngarong*, meaning, literally, 'hidden' or 'concealed spirits', from the root *karong* (cover).³¹

A number of different types of guardian-spirits are recognized by the Saribas Iban of which only a small minority are associated with ancestors. In the past, as noted earlier, *tua'* were associated in particular with men of prowess and even now, at the beginning of the *Gawai Antu*, offerings are customarily made to the *tua'* of the men who will drink the ritual wines. These *tua'*, however, are only rarely identified with the spirits of ancestors and generally appear not as pythons, but in other spirit-animal forms.

When I began fieldwork in the Saribas, my longhouse host was the Iban ethnohistorian, Benedict Sandin. When I recorded his life history, Sandin stressed in our conversations that his life had been shaped at crucial junctures by the guidance he had received from the spirit of his deceased paternal grandmother, a redoubtable Paku elder known as Umang. The daughter of the last and greatest Paku Iban war chief, Linggir *Mali Lebu* ("the Invincible"), Umang married Linggir's successor, *Penghulu* Garran, who served the Brooke government as a war leader and later as the first government-appointed native chief of the Paku region (see Figure 2.5). Sandin's father, Attat, was the youngest son of Garran and Umang, and Sandin,

when he was born, became Umang's favorite grandchild. Umang died when Sandin was 10 years old. When he was 19 and still a bachelor (*bujang*), Sandin joined a group of friends in cockfighting at another longhouse. Afterwards, while playing football, he sprained his ankle and was carried into the longhouse where a famous *dukun* then lived. Here, he spent the night under the *dukun*'s care. Back at his parental longhouse, his maternal grandmother dreamed that she was visited by Umang, who asked, "Where is Bujang?" and then disappeared. "Bujang" was the affectionate family name (*buah gaga*) by which Sandin was known at the time. The next morning, climbing into the loft, members of the family found a python wrapped around some lengths of rattan stored there. This was seen as confirming the authenticity of the dream and signaling that Umang had, in fact, taken Sandin under her spiritual care. The snake was given offerings. The next time that Umang appeared was several years after this, following Sandin's wedding, when he and his new wife paid their first formal visit to his wife's natal longhouse. A well-known priest bard in the house dreamed that night that an elderly lady, with grey hair, had arrived and taken a seat on the parents-in-law's gallery. Again, a python appeared in Sandin's family loft and this time, when he returned, Sandin himself made offerings to it. After this, over the next 20 years, Umang's spirit intermittently appeared in dreams, now directly to Sandin himself, always before some decisive event in his life. Sometimes she also appeared afterwards as a python, but not always. During these years Sandin worked in the Sarawak Museum, becoming, after independence, its first Malaysian curator. For this success, he credited his grandmother and whenever he had the opportunity, he made offerings to her both at her grave and in his family's loft. By the time I came to stay at the longhouse, these dreams had ceased.

Only a few ancestors are said to become *antu ngarong*. Like Umang, those who do are generally persons of prominence. Both Umang's father and husband similarly became well-known *tua*' and are said to have provided guidance to several later longhouse headmen and native chiefs in the Paku.³² In this sense, by guiding especially favored descendants, guardian-spirits are thought to help perpetuate political succession, material success, and fame within particular families. Some secrecy, however, usually attaches to these relationships, partly due to fear that rivals may attempt to harm the animal in whose form the *tua*' appears. Writing of the situation a century ago, the colonial officer-ethnographer Charles Hose (Hose and McDougall 1966 [1912], II: 90) reported that he had lived among Iban for fourteen years

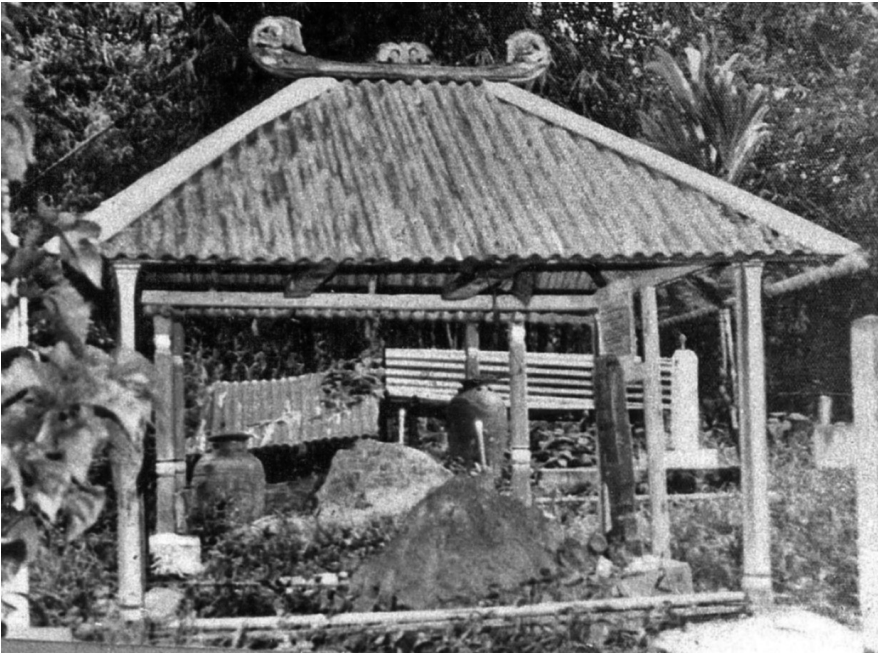


Figure 2.5. Graves of the last two war chiefs of the Paku Iban, Linggir *Mali Lebu* (“The Invincible”) and *Penghulu* Garran. Note the termite mounds (with candles on top) over each grave indicating the ascending wealth and influence to be enjoyed in future generations by their descendants. Both men also became well-known guardian spirits (*tua*). Batu Anchau cemetery, Ulu Paku, June 1978.

before he became aware of this form of ancestral spirit-guardianship. Even then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, he estimated that only about one Iban in a hundred was aided by what he called, translating *antu ngarong*, a “secret helper” (1966, II: 92).

Entombment and the Ancestors as Spirit-Heroes

One final and extremely infrequent form of ancestorship must be noted. This involves singular individuals of exceptional renown who, at death, become the object, not of the ordinary death rituals described earlier, but, rather, of an alternative ritual practice called *ngelumbong* or ‘entombment’.

In this case the body is not buried, but, instead, is placed inside a coffin (*rarong*) which is set on a raised platform above ground and covered with a tombhut-like roof (see Sather 2003b: 238–239, Uchibori 1978: 263–89). This

whole structure is called a *lumbong*, ‘tomb’ or ‘mausoleum’. Fluids are drained from the coffin and after the fleshy parts of the corpse have decomposed, the bones are removed, cleaned, bundled together, and placed inside a permanent container, either a jar or a hardwood coffin.³³ In the Saribas, almost all entombments occurred during the first generations of pioneer settlement, some 13 to 15 generations ago. Those entombed included early migration leaders or their children, founding settlers, and warriors. One of the last and most famous entombments in the region was that of Libau “Rentap,” an Ulu Skrang rebel leader who resisted Brooke rule to the end of his life. Following his defeat at Bukit Sadok in 1861, “Rentap” and his remaining followers retreated into the mountainous headwaters of the Skrang River (Pringle 1970: 129). Here, several years later, exhausted by his struggles, “Rentap” died and was entombed by his followers at a site, still visited today, on the mountaintop headwaters of the Skrang, Kanowit, and Katibas Rivers.

While the spirits of the ordinary dead are ritually installed in an after-world separate from that of the living, entombment has the opposite effect, making possible their continued presence in the living world. In this case, the deceased’s fate after death is modeled, not on that of ordinary human beings, but, rather, on that of the spirit-heroes. Keling, as the principal leader of the *Orang Panggau*, is said to have performed the first entombment for his father, Gila Gundi, by erecting a mausoleum for his remains on the summit of Bukit Santubong (literally, ‘Mount Coffin’) in western Sarawak, thereby assuring his immortality. Since then, entombment has been practiced for the same purpose, namely, to effect a direct apotheosis of the most potent of all ancestors, merging them not with the ancestral dead, but, rather, returning them as spirit-hero-like immortals to this world, so that they may act as regional guardians and sources of inspiration, invisible, yet immanently present to the living.

Conclusion

Relations between the living and the dead constitute crucially important social bonds in Saribas Iban society. As expressed in ritual and everyday life, these bonds are characterized at once by both continuity and transformation.

Life and death, on the one hand, interpenetrate, so that the ancestral dead remain intimately involved in the affairs of the living. On the other hand, death initiates major changes in these relationships. Thus, at death, the various components of the self disaggregate and each begins a separate

process of transformation that, potentially at least, gives rise to several different forms of ancestorship. The body at death is buried and, as a result, its constituent elements, including the bones, return to earth and, as earth, are said to be refashioned into new bodies. Bodily dissolution is therefore without ritual elaboration and, unlike many other Austronesian societies (see, for example, Giambelli 2002: 58–60), has no perceived connection with agricultural fertility. Rather, for the Iban, this connection is with the *semengat* or 'soul'. Thus, the souls of the dead are said to undergo an eventual transubstantiation and, returning to this world as dew, nourish and are reincorporated as rice. In this way, the ancestors persist in this world in a form directly associated with sustenance and the gift of human life itself. By contrast, the *bungai*, as a botanical image of mortal life, perishes at death and so must be severed from its family rootstock to insure social continuity, as represented, in this case, by the *bilik*-family.

At death, as we have seen, each person also becomes an *antu*, or 'spirit'. Initially identified with the corpse, this spirit gradually sheds its materiality. At this point, for most persons, the spirit, like the soul, journeys to Sebayan. However, a number of alternative possibilities may occur, depending on a person's spiritual favor and worldly success, each of which gives rise to other forms of ancestorship. For dead shamans, their spirits journey at this point to a separate afterworld, where, unlike the spirits of the ordinary dead, they attend to the needs of living shamans as spirit companions. Others, by contrast, particularly those who enjoyed notable success in life, may temporarily return from Sebayan to assist those they choose to favor as *tua*' or personal guardian-spirits. In doing so, they frequently appear as snakes, animals or in mythic spirit form, and in some instances they aid specifically their own descendants or close kin. These relations, however, are typically episodic as these spirits are only temporary visitors to this world. Occasionally, however, the dead may undergo a permanent transformation into this-worldly spirits, as in the case, for example, of those who become *antu gerasi*. Finally, in the past, for the most potent of all ancestors, there existed an alternative mortuary practice in the form of entombment. In this case, the body, rather than being buried, was kept in a raised mausoleum above ground, making it possible for kin and followers to retain the ancestor's spirit as an invisible but active presence in the living world.

For the great majority of the dead, the *Gawai Antu* marks the final installation of their spirits in Sebayan. Here, however, death, by itself, is insufficient to assure this final form of ancestorship. Those who die prematurely or

who suffer ill-fated deaths are precluded and so are unable to be recalled to this world during the *Gawai Antu*. For virtually all others, the *gawai* marks a crucial transformation in their recognition as ancestors. At its culmination, the spirits of the most recent generation of dead are recalled to the longhouse of their living descendants, where they are feasted and provisioned with tomb huts and *garong* baskets. All of this is described as an act of remembering and so of responding to the needs of the dead. Performing it is a duty which the living owe to their recently dead family members. Through this act of remembering, the living and the dead temporarily resume a relationship of intimacy. The spirits of the dead are welcomed directly into the longhouse where they are invited to mingle with the living and to share with them, in a state of co-presence, food and entertainment. Memories are on visible display in the form of objects formerly belonging to the dead and, for a time, the past is made present in *garong* baskets that, for each individual, personally embody his or her individuating life-journey.

As Tsintjilonis (2004: 376) has observed, much current anthropological theorizing attempts to link the efficacy of death rituals with forgetting or, for the living, with erasing their memories of the dead. But such theorizing, as he notes, may well, as here, run counter to indigenous understandings and so obscure the way in which intimacy and memory are seen as conferring agency upon the dead. For the Iban, this agency is critical, as the *Gawai Antu* is centrally about memory and the social and spiritual differentiation of the dead and how both, in turn, give the dead continuing efficacy in the living world. For the Iban, the spirits of the ancestors may at times be evoked as an anonymous totality. However, in other important ways, the ancestors are individualized, and, in this world, their names and personal achievements are recalled in oral genealogies and are affixed to graves, fruit trees, and other tangible objects identified with the past. Through the *Gawai Antu*, the spirits of the recent dead, as a result of being remembered by their living descendants, are reconstituted as an otherworldly community where their this-worldly achievements are acknowledged. In return, the ancestors, now as ritual visitors to this world, bring with them from the afterworld return-gifts that not only strengthen and enhance the lives of the living, but assist them, too, in their own self-differentiating life-journeys.

Notes

1 There are also other ways in which this variation may be understood. In this volume, Véronique Béguet, for example, approaches Iban ancestry through cosmology, arguing that the ancestors in their various transformations mediate relations between the Iban and the natural world. In this regard, her discussion usefully complements the arguments presented here.

2 The Iban are also present in West Kalimantan, where they number an estimated 14,000, the majority inhabiting a region along the Sarawak border known (in Iban) as the Emperan (see Wadley 1999: 597). In addition, some 10,000 Iban are present in Brunei Darussalam and a further 6–7,000 in Sabah (Sather 2004: 623).

3 For a more detailed account of my fieldwork and additional background information on the Saribas region, see Sather (2001: 13–19). Over the last twenty years, Christianity, urban migration, and other factors have brought about massive change and it is important to note that much of what is described here pertains to observations made in an upland rural area in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

4 The *Gawai Antu* is performed today only in the Betong, Saratok, Pakan, and Skrang Districts of Sarawak (Sather 2003b: 226). According to Uchibori (1978: 169–170), it was once performed by the Batang Ai Iban as well, but was later proscribed (see also Heppell et al. 2005: 139). In the face of Christian conversion and radical religious change, like the Sa'dan Toraja (Waterson 2009: 373), two kinds of rituals have retained a place of special importance among the Saribas Iban: 1) house ceremonies and 2) funerary rituals associated with the ancestors. The *Gawai Antu*, significantly, combines both. For a more detailed discussion of the factors contributing to the *Gawai Antu*'s resilience, see Sather (n.d.).

5 *Aki'-ini* is similar in this regard to the Toraja term for ancestors, *nene*, also meaning 'grandparents' (see Waterson 1984, 2009). The pairing of 'grandfather-grandmother' additionally reflects the fact that the Iban, like, for example, the Balinese (Giambelli 2002: 65), customarily think of ancestors as married couples. This is how they are most often recalled, for instance, in oral genealogies (Sather 1994a: 48–49).

6 Anthropologists have defined the term "ancestor" in a variety of ways. In the most inclusive sense, Metcalf and Huntington (1991) use the term to refer simply to dead forebears. Most, however, apply the term in a more restricted way. Thus, Bloch (1996: 43), for example, uses the term "ancestor" to refer to those forebears who are remembered and made the object of ritual actions such as sacrifices or libations. More relevant to our discussion here, Chambert-Loir and Reid (2002: xix) offer two meanings based on their reading of the insular Southeast Asian ethnography: 1) "all genealogical forebears, however distant," and 2) a "limited category of fore-

bears regarded as more potent than others, whose prominence the living society acknowledges.” As we shall see, both meanings are relevant to the Iban.

7 A few, notably Anda Mara, the Iban god of wealth, crossed the sea, while others came to live in the afterworld of the dead (*menoa Sebayan*). From here, these latter gods and goddesses lead the human *antu Sebayan* whenever they are ritually recalled to the living world.

8 Except in a shorthand manner of speaking, it is highly debatable whether the Iban actually believe that the gods, spirit-heroes, and ancestors “become” animals as Béguet suggests. They may certainly assume an animal form through acts of metamorphosis, but the Iban relate to them in essentially human terms, as anthropomorphic beings, not as animals.

9 Among the Sadong Land Dayaks (or Bidayuh), Geddes (1954: 26) notes that the spirits of the ancestors are also said to eventually become ‘gods’ (*tampa*). In contrast to the Saribas Iban, this occurs, however, only after they have passed through a series of afterworlds, the first of which is also called Sebayan. The notion of multiple afterworlds, each exerting a “purgatorial quality” – purifying the spirits of the dead as they pass from one to the next – differs from the Iban and strongly suggests Malay influence, as, indeed, some of Geddes’s own informants observed (1954: 26).

10 This is not to say that all *petara*, and even less, all *antu*, originate as human ancestors. While the Iban may legitimately be said to worship their ancestors (see Wadley 1999), such worship is not an isolated practice, but coexists with other practices, many of them addressed to other, non-ancestral agencies, such, for example, as rice souls. In this sense, Iban religious life is fully consistent with Chambert-Loir and Reid’s (2002: xviii) view that nowhere in the Austronesian world is the worship of ancestors a religion in itself.

11 Their afterlife existence, while unenviable, and certainly not a desirable fate, is nonetheless a socially engaged one. Their spirits live, as a community, with those of others who died a similar death, and here, in their special domains, they are visited during the singing of the *sabak* by the souls of the ordinary dead as the latter journey to Sebayan.

12 The human//animal opposition is thus reversed in this instance, and from the perspective of the *antu gerasi*, human souls are perceived as animals.

13 *Antu gerasi* ancestors are, however, regularly attracted to the longhouses of their descendants during ritual celebrations, and if offerings are not provided, they may disturb the proceedings (for an example, see Sather 2001: 446). They may also become the spirit-helpers of curers (*manang* and *dukun*).

14 These relations often have a “totemic” quality (see Hose and McDougall 1966, II: 96 ff.) in that the family of a person who is aided by a *tua*, or the descendants of an individual who is thought to have become a spirit-animal, may not kill or

eat the animal in whose form the spirit appears. Interestingly, many of the best-known examples date from the period of Iban resistance to colonial rule, causing Wadley (2004: 625) to describe these transformations as part of an Iban “theology of resistance.” In the Saribas, one example is Aji, a Padeh war leader and implacable foe of Brooke rule, who, after being killed by Brooke forces in 1858 (Sandin 1994: 89–90), appeared in the Skrang River as a crocodile. Over the next two years, this animal-spirit reputedly took a great many lives, until the Skrang warriors, who, as Brooke allies, had severed Aji’s head, returned it to his kin in the Padeh for burial. Another example is the Ulu Ai’ rebel war leader, Ngumbang, who resisted Brooke rule, on and off, until 1908 (Wadley 2004, Pringle 1970: 220–246). During his wars of resistance, Ngumbang was aided by both the spirit-heroes and a *tua*, in this case, a *nabau* water serpent. When Ngumbang eventually died, after having made peace with the Brooke government, he himself is said to have become a *nabau* (Wadley 2004: 625).

15 A common Saribas saying is that the living and the dead are separated by only a thin membrane such as covers the *lemayong* fruit. The meaning is that we would be able to see the dead and fully share their experiences if it were not for a thin translucent film that covers our eyes (see Sather 2001: 111–115).

16 Many Iban say that human beings have multiple souls and describe this particular soul as the ‘body soul’ (*semengat tuboh*) (for a detailed discussion see Sather 2001: 51 ff.).

17 Indeed, my first encounter with the Saribas Iban term for “ancestors” came quite unexpectedly when, in the early days of my fieldwork, I began to record harvest prayers for the recall of the padi souls (*sampi ngambi’ semengat padi pulai*). These prayers were addressed by each family, literally, to ‘our grandfathers-grandmothers’ (*aki’-ini’ kami*).

18 The term *bunga* or *bungai* in everyday speech means ‘flower’. *Ayu* is an alternative term, although in some contexts, the two have somewhat different meanings (see Sather 2001: 58–65). While the details are beyond the present essay, in general terms *bungai* tends to be used, as here, in connection with mortality, while *ayu* is more frequently associated with images of longevity and reproduction.

19 Bukit Rabong is not visible from the Ulu Paku where I did my fieldwork, but can be readily seen from higher elevations along the Sarawak–West Kalimantan border. It is easily identifiable by its distinctive profile, which is likened to that of a gong (*agong* or *tawak*), with a high rounded protuberance on the top (Sather 2001: 117). From its profile and the direction in which it appears from the Sarawak border, this earthly Mount Rabong is almost certainly the same mountain that people in the upper Kapuas call Gunung Tilung, Tevilung, or Tebilung and which many, like the Taman and others, regard as the abode of the dead (Bernard Sellato, personal communication). According to Sellato, this mountain is identified on maps of West

Kalimantan as Gunung Liang Sunan and is located on the left bank of the Mandai River. The Iban term *rabong* means, literally, 'apex', 'summation', 'zenith', or 'highest point' (Sather 2001: 116). In Saribas chants, Bukit Rabong is described as rising immediately beneath the 'zenith of the sky' (*perabong langit*). In contrast to some Borneo peoples (e.g., Weinstock 1987), the Mandai River is not considered by present-day Iban to be an origin place from which the ancestors migrated, nor does it lie within an area of current Iban settlement. Instead, as Reed Wadley (personal communication) observed, both it and Bukit Rabong exist, for most Iban, at the visible peripheries of everyday geographical awareness.

20 *Yang* refers specifically to the spirit-guides of ritual specialists, i.e., shamans (*manang*) and priest bards (*lemambang*) and is distinguished from *tua*, the guardian-spirits that assist others in the pursuit of this-worldly success.

21 Since my initial fieldwork in the 1970s, many Christian families have replaced the singing of the *sabak* with a simple Christian service.

22 Without performing the *besserara' bungai*, the dead, it is said, may continue to exert an unhealthy hold over their living kin, causing them illness or wasting family resources. Consequently, should survivors fall ill or suffer a reverse of fortunes, the *besserara' bungai* may also be held, separate from the funerary cycle, as a curing ritual (see Sather 1978: 317, 2001: 325–326).

23 Note that during the *Gawai Antu*, the spirits of the dead begin their nightly visits to the longhouse well before this formal invocation occurs.

24 The latter is said to have taught the ancestors how to perform the *Gawai Antu*.

25 There is, in fact, some ambiguity about the nature and precise location of the *Ranyai* (see Sather 2003b: 189), as it is also represented materially in a variety of ritual shrines. In some contexts its fruits take the form of trophy heads (*antu pala*) severed from slain enemies. Thus, the *Ranyai* is also associated with headhunting and so with the former ritual cult of warfare.

26 The role of these drinkers clearly highlights the continuing significance of male prowess in Saribas society. During the 1970s and 1980s, most of those who were asked to perform the part of warriors were either policemen or soldiers in the Malaysian army. When I first began fieldwork in Sarawak, there was still an active Communist insurgency in which a number of younger Iban men were then fighting. Others had seen military action in the 1960s during *Konfrontasi*, or earlier yet, as trackers with the British Army during the Malayan Emergency. To be eligible to drink these ritual wines, a man should have either received a dream command or taken a human life in combat (*bedengah*) (Sather 1993: 101).

27 This is dramatically brought home by numerous cautionary stories that describe past disasters occasioned by ritual mistakes. Similarly, care is taken to prevent the dead from intruding into more intimate living spaces, for example by erecting

the *rugan* along the public passageway, rather than inside the family's apartment (Sather 1993: 100).

28 There was a link here with sexuality as well, as traditionally, until the early twentieth century, the night that followed was one of institutionalized courting (*malam ngayap maia gawai*), in which the rules against adultery were temporarily suspended and married men and women were allowed to court other partners (Sather 1993: 112).

29 As, in a parallel way, an act of successful headhunting in the past completed the transformation of the dead into spirits, while, at the same time, releasing the immediate survivors from mourning restrictions. In this sense, the acts of wine-drinking by the warriors during the *Gawai Antu* may be said to function as a ritual substitute for taking heads.

30 Thus, the Iban use of teknonyms does not result in "genealogical amnesia," as the Geertz (1967) claim it does in Bali. On the contrary, while little used in adult life, where egalitarian values tend to predominate, personal names come to the fore at death, as part of the process of social and spiritual differentiation described in this chapter. The only persons who do not appear in the *tusut* are those who died nameless or without producing living descendants. In the latter case, childless couples seek to avoid this prospect by the common practice of adopting children, especially those of siblings (see Freeman 1970: 18–19).

31 While Béguet (in this volume) is correct in reporting that the Iban say that the dead may 'become' (*nyadi*) snakes, they equally well say that the dead may 'conceal themselves' (*ngarong*) as snakes. In the ritual stanza quoted above, the deceased's spirit informs the mourners, literally, in Iban, 'I will conceal myself as a snake' (*ka karong aku ular*) (Sather 2001: 362). This act of concealment in the body of a snake or other animal one informant compared to wearing the animal's body 'like a shirt' (*baka baju*).

32 Following his death in 1874, Linggir, for example, is said to have reappeared as a snake, generally described as having the body of a python and the head of a cobra (*sawa tedong*), which was often seen sleeping on a stack of firewood kept on the upper gallery of Penghulu Garran's longhouse at Tanjong, Ulu Paku. This snake was regarded as the *tua* of Garran, Linggir's successor and son-in-law, and whenever it appeared, it was fed offerings by the members of Garran's family. For long intervals it disappeared from Tanjong, during which time it reportedly appeared elsewhere to advise other kin, many of them also local leaders. Around 1910 the snake is said to have disappeared completely (Sather 1994c: 13, fn.).

33 Hence, the procedure is essentially the same as so-called "secondary treatment of the dead." Wadley reports (personal communication) that in the Emperan this container may be placed in a cave, rather than in a raised, open-air mausoleum.

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CHAPTER 3

Separated Dead and Transformed Ancestors: Two Facets of Ancestorship among the Uut Danum of West Kalimantan

Pascal Couderc

TOWARDS THE END OF 1996, a rumour spread along the Ambalau river in West Kalimantan, according to which a villager from the neighbouring Lekawai river was changing into a watersnake. His body was reportedly already covered with scales and only his head remained human. I happened to know this young man, who had recently been severely affected with ringworm. It was later told that he had completed his transformation and was about to crawl down to the river, which would happen as soon as his relatives gathered for a farewell feast. Husked rice could thereupon be scattered to send prayers to him in case of need – “by the bucketful,” added a young sceptic. Some people said that he had met a female watersnake in a dream and that they were about to get married. Others warned that he might share the fate of the legendary ancestor Koling of Nanga Sake village, killed long ago during a fight with fellow watersnakes, whose dead body, cut in seven pieces, gave rise to a group of islands located on the middle course of the Melawi river. Back in the upper Melawi ten years later for a short visit, I learnt that the Lekawai villager had perfectly recovered.

This anecdote illustrates the enduring influence among the Uut Danum¹ of West Kalimantan of a mythological pattern that I shall call the “transformed ancestor.” This is a concept that I have devised to describe a pattern resembling one described by Véronique Béguet (2006). Her analysis of the Iban of Malaysian Borneo, which highlights the importance of metamorphosis as a means to establish ancestorship in Borneo, has significantly influenced my approach to the present chapter. Frequently found in their own oral tradition and that of their Ngaju neighbours in Central Kalimantan (Danandjaya 1971: 266–267, Schärer 1966: 142–144, 234–239, 1963: 143–146),

the pattern of the transformed ancestor involves the metamorphosis of a living human being – a man in most cases – into an animal, usually a watersnake or a hawk, who subsequently becomes a protecting spirit for his descendants. Before taking leave, he informs his relatives that, should they or his future descendants need help in urgent situations, they may call him by scattering husked rice mixed with turmeric.²

Transformed ancestors include a number of mythical ancestors from whom Uut Danum subgroups trace their origins, as well as some more localized helping spirits. They also include other famous ancestors of the past such as Patih Manca, a prominent nineteenth-century chief, who according to oral tradition and written sources (Epple n.d. 3, Kühr 1896–97, VI: 229, Zimmermann 1968: 325–327; see also Schwaner 1853–54, I: 182) married a female watersnake and settled in the Melawi river at Teluk Osa. Although he belonged to a different ethnic group (possibly the Osa people of the middle Melawi), several Uut Danum families in various villages of the Ambalau basin to this day recognize him as their ancestor (*tahtu*) and regularly give him food offerings during ritual celebrations.

Of course, transformed ancestors are exceptional. Most people leave the visible world by dying. Furthermore, the dead, including those who received full mortuary treatment, do not feature among the spirits that the Uut Danum readily turn to in their daily existence. For example, they are virtually absent from the system of vows and vow-redeeming (*hajat*) which is the typical form of communication with spirit helpers. Whereas this form of spirit communication is based on a conditional engagement to pay off a debt upon fulfilment of a request, relations with the dead are defined by the unconditional obligation to perform mortuary rituals. Most contacts with the spirits of dead relatives occur before the completion of mortuary rituals, which have usually included secondary treatment of the deceased's remains. Beyond this often protracted period the spirits of the dead are not expected to interfere in the existence of the living, neither to harm nor help them, although both of this may indeed happen. In other words, the state of relationship with the spirits of dead forebears that should ideally result from the correct execution of mortuary rituals is mutual independence and indifference.

As Béguet argues for the Layar river Iban (2006), metamorphosis among the Uut Danum is thus a principal way in which some individuals can become ancestral spirit helpers.³ In contrast to their Iban counterparts, Uut Danum transformed ancestors typically undergo metamorphosis while still

alive. Béguet also argues that death among the Iban is only one manifestation of a more general principle of the metamorphosis of “soul” into “spirit” (2006: 138). Lévy-Bruhl made a similar claim when he observed that the phenomenon of *double existence*, allowing the same person (or “soul”) to appear, now in human, now in animal form, was as natural for the dead as for the living (1963: 114, 213). In the Indo-Malaysian world, some categories of animals (e.g., tigers, crocodiles) are frequently involved in stories of the metamorphosis of human beings, regardless of whether the transformation happens during life or after death (e.g., Lévy-Bruhl 1963, Skeat 1972).

The approach followed in this chapter simultaneously recognizes the importance of metamorphosis as a principle of animic transformation and the implications of an ideology of ancestry predicated on a fundamental opposition between life and death. I submit that, far from offering evidence that “formerly the dead changed into hawks or into watersnakes,” as claimed by Hans Schärer (1963: 143, 92), myths about transformed ancestors – and the fact that they feature *living* characters – exemplify a form of ancestorship with which the dead are concerned only marginally, and mortuary rituals even less. The general purpose of the chapter is to explore the contrasts between two processes of transformation which constitute two paths toward ancestorship, appearing in substantially different yet complementary forms. These two independent processes consist, first, of metamorphosis and some related means through which some mainly living ancestors are turned into protecting spirits, and second, of mortuary rites which incorporate spirits of deceased parents into a community of forebears and make their remains into symbols of the integrity and continuity of family-groups. While associated with independent processes, it is argued that these two complementary forms of ancestorship are expressions of a single, two-faceted ideology.

Naming the Ancestors

The Uut Danum refer to ancestors in three main ways: as elders, forebears, and spirits of the dead. As elders or predecessors, ancestors are referred to by the expression *uLun oko'* (“old people”),⁴ qualified by *hoLu'* (“before”) or *Lomoy* (“in the olden days”) to indicate that they lived in the past. Used alone, *oko'* (“old”) is a term of respect for old people and more generally for people of high social status; *okon* formerly designated community chiefs or house/village elders (*okon Lovu'*). The adverb *ngoko'* may be used to complement a verb in order to indicate that an action is performed carefully

or with good intention. Mention of the ancestors as elders is collective and impersonal, typically to stress the inherited and often immutable character of the social institutions (e.g., customary law, ritual practices) that they founded or have handed down to the present. Since this aspect of relations with ancestors is not of central concern in this chapter, it suffices to make one remark. The continuity of tradition emphasized in the discursive uses of *uLun oko'* is anchored in an ever-unfolding past. Expressions such as "according to the words of the elders," often heard in daily conversations and formal discourse, merge ancestors of the ancient past with recently deceased and still living elders (who are also called *uLun oko'*) who taught the present generation these words which they had themselves learnt from their own elders. This is an aspect of ancestorship that indeed transcends time as well as the divide between the living and the dead existing in other contexts. However, the authority of ancestors as elders, although often invoked by the Uut Danum, does not under normal circumstances translate into direct spiritual agency; in other words, the expression "elders of the past" does not designate a definite category of ancestor *spirits*.⁵

As forebears or relatives of ascending generations, ancestors are collectively referred to as "grandparents and great-grandparents" (*tahtu' ajuh*). Individually, they are referred to with kinship terms according to generational level: *tahtu'* (second ascending generation, *ogo'* in address), *ajuh* (third ascending generation), *umbuh* (fourth ascending generation).⁶ *Tahtu'* (and, more rarely, *ajuh* and *umbuh*) may also be used for forebears of a higher, unknown, or unspecified generation, and more particularly for apical ancestors from whom shared origins are traced (e.g., *Londoy tahtu' uLun Tobahoy* "Londoi, (first) ancestor of the Tebahoi people"). As in other cognatic societies of Borneo, lineal and collateral same-generation ascendants above the parents' generation (i.e., *tahtu'*, *ajuh*, *umbuh*) are terminologically merged, so that for instance *ajuh* designates both one's great-grandparents and their siblings, cousins, and same-generation affines, as well as the great-grandparents of one's cousins and same-generation affines.⁷ Ancestors who function as focal points for collective memory (e.g., former titled chiefs, house or ossuary founders, famous warriors, transformed ancestors) may thus be referred to with these kinship terms by people who are not their direct descendants.⁸ The notion of ancestry (expressed by such terms as *koturun*, *Lihit*, *uhtus*) is similarly classificatory, enabling people to claim "descent" (*koturun*) from ancestors who are in fact lateral or affinal relatives of their own progenitors. This is true in particular for some mythical ancestors including the two major heroes of the *tahtum*

epics, Tambun and Bungai (who are also transformed ancestors in the above-defined sense). For instance, the genealogical links which the upper Lekawai river people are able to trace to Lanying Suling (see below), whom they generally acknowledge as their original ancestor (*Ihto' koturun Lanying SuLing*: "We are descended from Lanying Suling"), actually go through his sister Kasiang, whereas Lanying Suling did not leave any offspring of his own. Neither did Sahavung, the apical ancestor of the people of the Jengonoi river, who left his human wife to return to the sky after the death of his only child. The semantic ambivalence of the terms for ancestors and ancestry allows them to express the fundamental value of shared origin (*asar*), which involves notions of identity and even consubstantiality between co-descendants of a given or putative ancestor (e.g., as in the formulations *hico' koturun*, "of one ancestry," *hico' usi' daha'*, "of one flesh and blood"). In addition, it allows the singling out, as the best representative of that shared identity, of a prestigious ancestor who is not necessarily the apical ancestor himself, but his or her descendant, collateral, or affine.

As dead people, ancestors are termed *Liow*. When someone dies, he carries on his existence as *Liow*, a spirit of the dead. From that point onward, he will normally not be spoken of without adding "*Liow*" before his name or the appropriate teknonym or kinship term (e.g., *Liow Sépung* "the late Sepung," *Liow amay Tavan* "the deceased father of Tavan," *Liow iné* "my deceased mother," *Liow tahtu' ajuh* "(my) deceased forebears"), to evoke either his existence in the present (as a spirit) or in the past as a living person (*Liow* then meaning merely "the late"). This usage makes it easy to identify a dead forebear in discourse and to distinguish him or her from a living elder or from an immortal or transformed ancestor, and more generally from any other category of spirit. While kinship terms, those designating forebears in particular, merge living and dead relatives (see Appleton and Sillander, this volume), the life–death discontinuity is reintroduced in this way into the ancestor terminology thus overriding this semantic continuum.

Mortuary Rituals and the Life–Death Dichotomy

Given their close similarities with Ngaju mortuary practices, the master example in Hertz's standard description of double obsequies (1960a), it is not surprising that Uut Danum mortuary rituals better fit Hertz's transitional view of death than another paradigm which sees death, and the dead in particular, as a source of regeneration (Bloch and Parry 1982, Nicolaisen

2003, Sather 2003: 225–226). Not that the regeneration or recycling of some constitutive elements of the dead may not occur; on the contrary. But, as we will see next, it does so mainly as a by-product rather than the intended effect of mortuary rituals. The latter include three stages: burial (*nanom*) and post-burial rites (*nosang*); the lifting of mourning taboos (*nyoLat*); and finally secondary burial (*daLo'*), which can be celebrated from several months to several years after death. An act of filial and marital piety, *daLo'*, which is the most important Uut Danum ritual in terms of duration, participation, and expenses, is performed mainly for older people who have grown-up children, and often grandchildren, although many elders receive only a *nyoLat*, or even only a *nosang*, in the case of the poorest. Five out of ten secondary rituals observed in the period 1990–96 involved the secondary placement of remains, while in the remaining cases the unopened grave was cemented or a wooden structure erected above it, both practices being modern substitutes for traditional secondary treatment. Only a minority of the deceased have in recent years been exhumed in the upper Melawi region.

The main elements of personhood affected by death are the soul of the living person (*morua'*), the breath (*hasong*), the body (*béhti'*), and the spirit of the dead (*Liow*). *Morua'* is both a life-force, located in the body and associated with the breath, and the dream-experiencing and night-wandering double of the living person. Death occurs when the breath is annihilated (*nihow hasong*) and the *morua'* leaves the body definitely, generally because of being abducted (and subsequently devoured) by a spirit. The body begins to putrefy, producing liquids that if released in abundance during the wake of the corpse will be buried with it in the grave. The spirit of the dead (*Liow*, also called "*Liow otu*" or "*otu' Liow*") comes into existence at the moment when life leaves the body, making it into a corpse, which is referred to as a "spirit" (*otu*), as is the dead himself.⁹ Of less importance for mortuary rituals is the *avin*, a sort of individual guardian-spirit that is specifically in charge of protecting and nurturing the body. Contrary to the *morua'* with which it is sometimes identified, the *avin* will, according to some informants, continue its existence after the death of its human counterpart and protect the latter's children and grandchildren (see Appell and Appell 2003: 55, for Rungus conceptions of a similar agency in north Borneo). In the Ambalau area, it receives food offerings at a special altar during mortuary rituals (*nyoLat* and *daLo'*) and some important life rituals.

In conformity with Hertz's model, death as a ritual process revolves around the gradual separation of the spirit of the deceased from the decaying

corpse and from the mourners. Before *nyoLat*, the ceremony for lifting the mourning taboos, which may be celebrated three, seven, fourteen or twenty-one days after burial, the spirit of the dead stays in and around its former house and represents a potential danger for mourners and villagers on whom it can inflict various types of pains and illnesses, subsumed under the category of *poros joon*. The most typical symptom of *poros joon* is temporary blindness caused by the spirit of the dead pressing the eyes of its victims with its finger. During this period the spirit of the deceased is also likely to appear, in the forest or near the village cemetery, in the form of a terrifying creature with bulging eyes and a long outstretched tongue (*Liow ngirat*, *Liow ngambé*). After *nyoLat*, the deceased departs to *Lovu' Liow*, the land of the dead, obtaining residence there in a farm hut which is given to him in the form of an ironwood post (*toras*) erected at the end of the ceremony.¹⁰

The ritual process culminates with the celebration of *daLo'*, which realizes the definitive aggregation of the *Liow* into the community of the dead and the placement of the deceased's bones (or ashes) into a house-shaped ironwood repository, which is the visible counterpart of the deceased's permanent house in the afterworld. However, more emphasis is put on separation than on aggregation as the aimed outcome of secondary burial, which represents the deceased as a relative with whom all ties must be severed, and a spirit whose dangerous character is not radically altered as time passes. *DaLo'* marks the termination of feelings of affection towards the deceased, who is asked not to impose his or her presence upon living relatives any more, to cease disturbing and "stop remembering" (*tondo' nohou*) them. The *Liow* is often directly associated with misfortune resulting from death, along with which it is "thrown away" (*indow*) towards the setting sun, a direction symbolically associated with death and the land of the dead. In the Ambalau, a special rite (*notova*) is performed in the evening of the *daLo'*'s big day and again the following night to expel the spirit of the deceased from every corner of his former house. Several men and boys holding a wooden stick in each hand walk quickly through the rooms of the house in a convergent movement to the main door, loudly striking the sticks on the floor as if chasing invisible chickens, beating also the kitchen hearth, heirloom jars, charms and other family belongings. Later the same night, a chant (*parung ngitot Liow*) may be performed to escort the deceased to the remote land of dead (*Lovu' Liow*), followed by the calling of the mourners' souls back into their owners' heads (*kurun morua*), beginning with the spouse and omitting none of the living descendants of the deceased.

Another major purpose of *daLo'* is "to share" (*magi'*, *tuLat*) with the dead, mainly in the form of sacrifices of pigs and cows (formerly also buffaloes) which are performed on the celebration's big day and constitute one of its emotional climaxes (another one being the exhumation of the deceased's remains, which takes place on the previous day). People hope prosperity will result from celebrating *daLo'* in conformity with ritual rules and there is a sense that it will do so in proportion to the gifts and sacrifices granted to the dead. At various moments the *Liow* is asked informally to reciprocate these gifts with charms, in particular charms (*pongohuLi'*) that "bring back" the pigs, the chickens, the rice, and other expenditures spent during the feast. The same request is presented more formally when the *parung ngitot Liow* is performed. Then the singer narrates how the deceased collects luck-bringing plant and tree species on high mountains of the spirit world, and requests charms from various inhabitants of it on behalf of his living relatives. It is uncertain, however, whether securing benefits from the dead can be said to represent an important goal of the *daLo'*, as reported for the Ngaju *tiwah* (Schiller 2002: 23). Sacrificed animals, which become the deceased's livestock in *Lovu' Liow*, funeral posts and bone repositories, which become their habitations, and the various other gifts dedicated to them during *daLo'*, are explicitly intended to provide a self-sufficient livelihood for the deceased in the otherworld. Giving the *Liow* his share of family property also fulfils a moral duty, especially strongly felt by widows and widowers, and if the deceased had expressed a formal wish that a *daLo'* be celebrated for him.¹¹ In both these ways, making gifts to the dead carries the meaning of freeing oneself from a constraining bond, in view of which the charms asked of the *Liow* appear to play the role of closing counter-gifts. The liberating purpose of this gift-giving is expressed in the following excerpt of an invocation:

So that he [i.e., the deceased] brings [these gifts] along to the river Kaju' Nahan, as a gift, as a share, so that he has enough pans and plates, enough paddy and glutinous rice, enough chicken and pigs as he returns to the river Bendu' Bendang. He departs with good feelings because there are many chicken and pigs, plates and knives, pans and pots, shared with him, given to him. He has obtained his share, his part . . . Let him not be angry, frightful, let him not anymore haunt his grandchildren, who live. That's it for him!¹²

Mortuary rituals are thus intended to bring about a state of mutual independence and indifference between the living and the dead. However, this

ideal order of things is difficult to obtain, if only because new deaths happen all the time and people cannot protect themselves against the wrongdoings of deceased distant kin whose mortuary rituals it is not their responsibility to perform. But even older dead, including one's own close relatives and forebears, are potentially dangerous, even if a *daLo'* was arranged for them. To meet a dead relative in a dream is of no consequence if words are not exchanged; such a dream is credited to a normal feeling of longing. But if the dead answers the dreamer's questions, or if the dreamer does not notice the stale taste of the food served to him in the village of the dead, or otherwise fails to perceive the inverted character of the village, this means that he is soon to die. To neutralize the effect of the dream, several means exist, from the simple *ngopahtung* rite in which a little anthropomorphic rattan effigy is offered to the *Liow* as a surrogate of the dreamer's *morua'*, to a several-day shamanic ritual (*hoboLian*) aimed to retrieve the patient's *morua'* from the land of the dead. To prevent such undesired contact with the dead, a *hoboLian*, or even a more large-scale *nyakay* ritual, should also be arranged after *daLo'*.

The spirits of the dead are also said to be attracted to various social and ritual events. Thus when an overly drunk woman fell to the floor in a trance-like state during a wedding feast, some attendants suggested that she was possessed by a recently-deceased co-villager. To prevent such intrusion, it is customary to utter a short invocation to dispel *Liow* as a preamble to life rituals, such as the first bath of babies or the singing of shamanic chants or epics, which the *Liow* enjoy as much as the living. A basic *nosang* ritual involving the sacrifice of a chicken is held with the same aim prior to *nyakay*, a major shamanic ritual during which the sponsor's *morua'* is sent to the upperworld to be healed and regenerated. In these circumstances the dead are typically addressed as an anonymous totality of *Liow* including both ancient dead and spirits of recently deceased relatives:

I sweep, I throw, I dispatch the dead, the spirits (*Liow otu'*) out of this
house,
All the spirits of dead kin, close and distant relatives, grandparents and
great-grandparents,
Those who have just died and those who died long ago.

(*nyakay* ritual, Ukai, 1991).

A similar rhetoric is apparent when people call back the "souls" (*morua'*) of their knives and plates for fear that the deceased might take them away, or

when they say that the “souls” (*Liow*)¹³ of similar small domestic implements left on the deceased’s grave will follow them to the land of the dead. What it reveals, beyond the reluctance of the dead to leave their relatives and to give up some of the pleasures of life, is a great ideological divide – ritual, symbolic, topologic – between the domains of life and death, into which everything should fit unambiguously, beginning with the dead themselves. Hence this clear-cut opposition between *morua*’ and *Liow* and the necessity to “finish death” (*ngumbot pahtoy*; in Indonesian, *menyelesaikan kematian*), which is also the official pretext for requesting the nowadays necessary police authorization to perform *daLo*’. The contrast between mortuary rituals and life-oriented rituals (e.g., those of the life-cycle, shamanic rites, rice rituals), common among societies of the Barito language family (Schiller 1997: 54, Sillander 2004: 172, fn. 110, Weinstock 1983: 36), is likewise expressed through dualistic symbolism. For instance, husked rice used to summon the dead to attend *daLo*’ must be rubbed with a particular species of turmeric (*hénda*’ *Lokuang*, possibly *Curcuma xanthorriza*), whereas ordinary turmeric (*hénda*’ or *hénda*’ *hinut*: “true” turmeric) is used to contact spirits in life rituals. Dualistic symbolism also differentiates actions and objects dedicated to the dead versus the living in death rituals. For example, at one important juncture of the *daLo*’, the solemn *kanjan* dance is first performed “to the left” (*ngomuLoy*, i.e., in clockwise motion), at which point selected participants embody the spirits of the dead with characteristically inverted gestures, and then “to the right” (*ngotou*’, i.e., anti-clockwise), at which point the mass of participants represent the living. Similarly, ironwood *toras* posts “for the living” are made from living trees and erected alongside similar but higher posts made from dead trees “for the dead.”

Such ritual and symbolic compartmentalisation of the spheres of life and of death is useful to protect the living against the contaminating power of death. In this regard, it suggests that death, occupying forever its own half of the ideological divide, cannot be fully encompassed by nor transformed into life. Conversely, life cannot be secured otherwise than by separating out death again and again, as exemplified by the most elementary of all Uut Danum ritual activities, the *pohpas*, which is performed at least once during all life and death rituals. During *pohpas* (“to sweep”), a fowl is first waved facing sunset to send away various evil influences in that direction (misfortune, illness, bad dreams, bad omens, etc.), then facing sunrise while good harvests, health, well-being, good luck, etc. are asked for, before it is finally killed and its blood used to perform life-enhancing unctions (*sahki*)’.¹⁴

Beyond Mortuary Rituals: The Significance of Bone Repositories

Alongside this life–death separation, secondary mortuary rituals also stress a fundamental sense of continuity and shared identity with the dead as forebears – both those for whom they are performed and more distant ancestors whose memory or presence they also invoke. Interaction with dead forebears effects integration among the living on three levels in *daLo'*. On the first level, there is the group of mourners, the deceased's closest relatives, who are isolated from other participants at several junctures of the ritual (i.e., during *kurun morua'* and other prayers, and during animal sacrifices). For the mourners, negating the deceased's spiritual presence goes together with affirming their descent links with them, sometimes to the point of projecting this relation on future descendants:

I sweep towards the setting sun (*mahtanondow baLop*),
 Extinguished (*baLop*) be the dead the spirit,
 Extinguished his desire to linger on and to trouble his children and
 grandchildren, his great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren
(*daLo'*, Buntut Sabon, 1991).

The second level of ritual integration encompasses the larger circle of relatives who take part in the ritual, as guests if the ritual is sponsored by a single family, or as co-organizers if several related families celebrate *daLo'* for their deceased members at the same time. This circle of relatives, who recognize themselves as being “of one descent line” (*hico' koturun*), provides the core of the participants in the *kanjan* dance which is performed again and again during the ritual. It is roughly coextensive with the group owning the bone repository (*kodiring* or *sandung*) into which the deceased's remains are placed on the last day of the performance – where exhumation is still practiced and such a group exists. Membership in this group is governed primarily by descent, all descendants of the *kodiring*'s original founder(s), and their spouses, being entitled to have their remains placed in it (see Hudson 1978: 222, for a similar rule among the Ma'anyan). When several members of a family or a *kodiring*-owning collectivity are exhumed during the same *daLo'*, their bones are placed in the ossuary by order of generational seniority. Prayers are addressed to the *Liow* of formerly deceased relatives whose remains it contains to inform them about the arrival of the newcomer(s) and to request charms from them.

The third level of integration that can be identified in *daLo'* includes the guests who contribute gifts to the sponsors of the ritual on the basis of a strict balanced reciprocity. They are often more distant relatives of the deceased residing in neighbouring villages. After being first aggressively denied access to the sponsor's house or village and treated as strangers, they are welcomed and invited to join the great circle of *kanjan* dancers around the invisible presence of the *Liow*, all boundaries being finally dissolved between mourners and non-mourners, kin and non-kin. Public speeches and improvised singing sessions, for which the sponsors and their guests assemble to commemorate the deceased, stress the common descent of all participants, from river-based groupings of several villages which recognize a common origin and frequently engage in relations of ceremonial exchange, or from larger descent categories (*uhtus*), which were originally sub-ethnic groups such as the Dohoi or Penanyoi (see below). Celebrating *daLo'* for close forebears is thus also an occasion for the living to connect themselves with more remote ancestral origins.

Bone repositories are the major exponents of the continuity between dead forebears and their living descendants. As in other Southeast Asian



Figure 3.1. An abandoned multi-family house with its mortuary monuments, including three *sopundu'* poles and a *kodiring* (bone repository) raised on two posts (partly obscured by the central pole in the foreground). Jengonoi river.

societies, they are shaped like miniature houses and located within villages (Waterson 1990: 209), typically in front of or next to individual houses (see Figure 3.1). They often look neglected (cf. Avé 1990: 43) and unless they threaten to give way with their contents or suffer damage, little attention is usually paid to them, reflecting the general attitude of indifference to the dead once installed in the afterworld. During *daLo*, however, the *kodiring* becomes the actual “house of the dead,”¹⁵ to which the spirits of the deceased are said to “return” (*buLi*) as their bones are reunited with those of their relatives and forebears.¹⁶

Bone repositories were traditionally owned by multi-family houses (*Lovu*’ or *béhtang*, i.e., “longhouses”) which used to form local settlements of their own. These communal houses were usually founded by groups of close relatives, for instance a set of married siblings (or cousins) or a conjugal pair with their married children, and included between five and twenty-five contiguous apartments, each accommodating one or several economically independent conjugal families (Enthoven 1903: 432, see also Molengraaff 1900, van der Willigen 1898). Significantly, the term *Lovu*’ is now also applied to nucleated villages, the presently dominant settlement pattern, to stress their symbolic unity in contexts of ritual interaction with other villages. When the upper Melawi area was subjected to indirect Dutch rule in the last decades of the nineteenth century, representatives were appointed among the elders of the largest houses and given titles by the *Panembahan* (Sultan) of Sintang (Enthoven 1903: 428–429, van der Willigen 1898: 393–394). Many *kodiring* which are still in use, or whose vestiges are visible in present villages or former settlements, are associated with the names of such titled characters who typically also were house elders or founders. Usually, these people either themselves erected the bone repository during their lifetime for the *daLo*’ of a relative, or then it was erected for their own secondary burial by their children or grandchildren. Some of the oldest of these repositories are more impressive than those constructed during the last fifty years, testifying to the importance of their founders in life and contributing to their renown after death.¹⁷

Building a repository to store the remains of its deceased members was normally a stage in the developmental cycle of a house, corresponding to its emergence as an autonomous house not subordinated to others with which it was affiliated and to which rights of access to other bone repositories were attached. Depending on its size, age, and the composition of its membership, a house might be associated with more than one family ossuary (see Grabowsky

1907: 74, Helbig 1982, I: XVIII, ill. 50). The closer the house approached the ideal model of a cognatic descent group conveyed by the epic literature (consisting of the close bilateral descendants of a focal ancestor and their spouses), the more likely it was to be associated with a single *kodiring* into which all house residents would be transferred after their *daLo'*, provided it was celebrated for all of them.¹⁸ This ideal one-to-one pattern still persists in several Ambalau river villages which have preserved small longhouses (with five to six apartments) (see Figure 3.2), and it was probably widespread in the past (see Molengraaff 1900: 340–341 for an example).¹⁹

With exhumation nowadays giving way to simple burial and collective houses to individual houses, incentives to build a new *kodiring* or maintain affiliation with an extant one (implying upkeep expenses) obviously decrease. A number of large concrete ossuaries were nonetheless erected in the 1980s and 1990s in the Ambalau river basin. In several cases, these “stone *kodiring*,” as they are called in ritual language, were built by related families that were no longer (or had never been) co-resident in a house, in order to replace timeworn or damaged wooden collective repositories. In 1991, fifty elementary families, scattered in several villages of the middle Ambalau, took part in the renovation of an old *kodiring* built six generations earlier by two brothers who had migrated from another river to found a settlement nearby. Before their transfer into a new concrete repository, built a few meters from the old one, the numerous skulls and bones it contained were rubbed with oil and perfume, wrapped in new cloths and given food offerings. The master of the ceremony read the genealogy of every participating family starting from the two founders. As this example illustrates, the ideal house represented by the *kodiring* may sometimes outlive the real house with which it was originally associated.

Materializing chains of ancestry, bone repositories symbolized the unity of communal houses and demonstrated the prestige and wealth of their founders. They could also play an important role in situations in which this unity was threatened. When a party refused to acknowledge charges in a lawsuit (e.g., concerning property disputes or accusations of adultery or sorcery), an oath (*tuLut*, *sumpah*) could be taken to ascertain the truth of the case. Rarely or no longer performed today, these oaths differed in terms of the techniques used and the categories of spirits invoked. When the *tuLut* took place at a collective bone repository, the resident spirits (i.e., the *Liow*) were summoned by an elder knocking on one of its posts or throwing ash or rice mixed with salt at it. The defendant who was “brave enough” to stand the

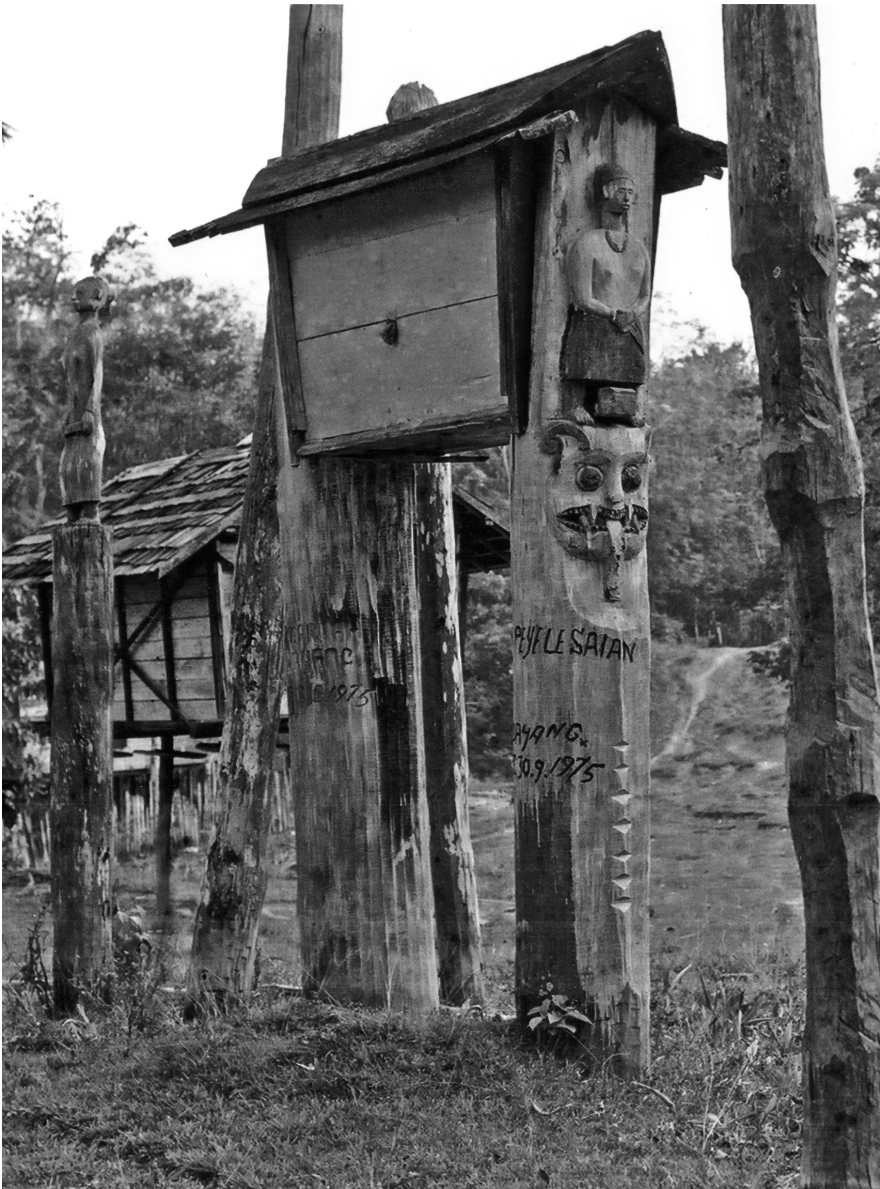


Figure 3.2. Bone repository owned by a small multi-family house, Jengonoi river. Built by the house founder in 1962 for the *daLo'* of his mother, this *kodiring* was used in five different secondary mortuary ceremonies spanning a period of forty years. It contains the bones of the founder, his mother, his wife, a sister, a nephew, and several of his children and grandchildren. Since a few years back, the current house heirs have started to paint it annually in connection with Christmas, New Year, or Easter.

trial (*bahanyi' hotuLut*) risked immediate death or difficult life conditions for him and his descendants (e.g., poor harvests, infertility, decimation of livestock). Comparison with curses (also referred to as *tuLut* or *sumpah*) that an offended parent or genealogical elder may utter during life against a child or genealogical junior with the same type of consequences (cf. Schiller 1997: 96, for the Ngaju) suggests that one of the components of the oath's efficiency was the moral authority of the forebears whose bones were stored in the repository. According to an informant who in his youth attended a *tuLut* at his natal village's *kodiring* in an affair of intergenerational adultery, the oath was performed at the bone repository of a rich deceased and the authority and punitive agency to which it appealed was specifically that of former titled elders (*okon*), that is, people who during their life had acted as *adat*-law administrators at the level of a *Lovu'* or village.

This conveys a form of individual or collective agency of the spirits of the dead when asked to arbitrate in disputes between their living relatives and descendants. A more impersonal form of agency, associated with the bones rather than the spirits of the dead, was involved in a very peculiar variant of the *tuLut* which could only be taken at a bone repository. Accusing someone of being a *kotu'*, a much dreaded hybrid creature of half human and half spirit condition, was – and still is – considered one of the gravest offences imaginable. To repair the wrong done to him, the accused had to perform the trial of dancing the above-mentioned *kanjan* dance around a bone receptacle. If he really was a *kotu'*, he would soon shiver or turn into an animal (e.g., wild boar, cat, dog, or frog), and the attendants would be entitled to kill him on the spot. If not, the accusing party was heavily fined. The same ordeal, practiced by the Central Kalimantan Ngaju (Schärer 1963: 52, Zimmermann 1968: 351), has received an elegant and original interpretation by Anne Schiller in her study of upper Kahayan mortuary rituals. The dance around the bone repository, she argues, reveals the latter's symbolic value as a family stronghold in which kin rest together beyond reach of the *hantuen* (the Ngaju equivalent of the Uut Danum *kotu'*) to whose attacks they had been exposed during their lifetime and at the moment of death, the most feared risk being the introduction of a *hantuen* into one's family through marriage with a non-relative (Schiller 1997: 92, 101–103).

Contemporary Uut Danum in the Melawi area are no less concerned about witches than the Ngaju and similarly consider the condition of *kotu'* to be transmissible through both descent and marriage. Unlike Kahayan villagers, however, they do not deny spouses access to bone repositories if they are

cognatically unrelated to the owners' family (Schiller 1997: 103, 107). Thus, Uut Danum ossuaries stress house group unity over genealogical unity, suggesting a more inclusive definition of kinship than among the Kahayan Ngaju.

Schiller motivates the role of the bone repository in the ordeal by the fact that it is "literally and symbolically, a place where the concentrated life force of the family is contained" (1997: 103).²⁰ This argument of hers is more questionable, at least if applied to the Uut Danum. Even though bone repositories symbolize the continuing existence of the dead in *Lovu' Liow*, as well as the permanence and genealogical integrity of *Lovu'* houses, and even though they used to be associated with magical potency expressing the ability of the spirits of the dead to cross the life–death divide to influence their descendants in exceptional circumstances, the bone repositories are in no apparent way symbols of life or sources of life-generating potency in themselves. I will argue later that such potency is instead contained in other objects inherited from forebears that like bone repositories belong to the estate traditionally held by multi-family houses. First, however, I will return to the transformed ancestors to explore further what bones and bone repositories more restrictively stand for and to provide a more precise understanding of the ancestorship of dead forebears.

Metamorphosis Versus Re-embodiment: Transformations of the Ancestors

Narratives about transformed ancestors involve two categories of spirit-animals, watersnakes (*Lobahta'*) and hawks (*atang*). Residing at the outer margins of the human world, at the entrance of the aquatic underworld and the heavenly upperworld respectively, they occupy symmetric positions in the dualistic topography of the cosmos, consistent with their complementarity (and sometimes interchangeability) in these narratives and the ritual practices that they legitimize. Both are benevolent spirits associated with a particular place or territory (see also Hardeland 1859: s.v. *atang*, *djata*). *Lobahta'* are huge watersnakes, named after particular deep river bends (*toLuk*) or confluences (*busung*) where they dwell, which constitute points of entry into the underworld. Most villages have one or several *Lobahta'* in their vicinity, which are propitiated for various purposes – especially, to ask for children, to protect women during pregnancy and childbirth, to protect newborn children – and receive food offerings on all important ritual occasions. They also deliver omens. For instance, if

sand piles up at a sandbank near a river confluence, representing the ridge of the house of the *Lobahta'* residing there, it indicates that the village will enjoy a good rice harvest.

Only a minority among the known *Lobahta'* are recognized as ancestors. Some informants make a distinction between such ancestral watersnakes and “genuine” ones (*Lobahta' asar*) that were not formerly humans. However, as local spirits who often act as village guardians – and which in some cases succeed one another along family lines – all *Lobahta'* are ancestral in the sense that relationships with them (or their forebears) are inherited from the ancestors and maintained over the generations. The same observation applies to spirit-hawks, to the tutelary spirits of village offering places, and to the personal spirit protectors (*otu' uray*) of particular forebears. In ritual chants, more distant *Lobahta'*, which are typically identified by a personal name or teknonym and a place of residence, are often mentioned in addition to local ones. Some of these distant *Lobahta'* are chosen for their fame or proven success in fulfilling vows (see Hardeland 1859: 13, on the celebrity of particular *atang* spirits among the Ngaju). But they are equally often selected on the basis of the descent links that the people invoking them trace to the locality with which these spirits are associated.

Atang are celestial spirit-hawks which are distinct from ordinary hawks (also called *atang*) in the same way as *Lobahta'* are from earthly snakes (see Schärer 1963: 150–152). Formerly they played an important role as augural birds from which the Uut Danum used to solicit omens prior to going headhunting, collecting debts, travelling, or moving houses. Rice was scattered to invoke the heavenly ancestor/master of hawks (*tahtu' atang*), who sent his grandchildren down to earth to deliver the requested omen by flying over one of two poles erected on the ground (cf. Hardeland 1859: 13, Schärer 1966: 122). Information on this mostly discontinued practice²¹ indicates that the augural hawks, like the watersnakes with which they are associated in some narratives which mention hybrid “*atang Lobahta'*,” were territorial spirits. They usually presided over large domains corresponding to the territories of sub-ethnic groups, and their names and places of residence, which are identical to those of these groups' apical ancestors, suggest that they originate from them.

Lobahta' and *atang* spirits have both animal and human attributes. Living as humans in their respective under and upper world domains, they assume animal form when they move out from these domains into the human world, emerging from the bottom of rivers or soaring high in the sky. Along

with the idea of humanity as a universal or unmarked modality of existence, the notion that bodily forms shift at boundaries that are both spatial and ontological is one of the central tenets of animism as recently redefined in anthropology (Descola 2005, Viveiros de Castro 1998). Metamorphosis and the identification of the body with a clothing are two widespread and often combined expressions of this mutability of physical forms in animistic societies around the world, including South-East Asia (Endicott 1979: 112, 124, Howell 1996: 139, Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471). The identification of the body with a clothing is also found in Borneo oral traditions. For instance, among the Ngaju, crocodiles are represented as anthropomorphic underworld beings which put on their crocodile clothes only when visiting the above-lying human world (Hardeland 1859: 103; see also Schärer 1963: 88–89, Zimmermann 1968: 325; Kershaw 2000: 65, for the Brunei Dusun; Geddes 1991: 84, for the Bidayuh). In Uut Danum epic narratives, animal bodies (e.g., of watersnakes, crocodiles, tigers, fighting cocks) are often represented as shirts (*koLambi*) or skins (*uhpak*) that the protagonists don, thereupon acquiring not only the appearance of these spirit-animals but also their behavioural characteristics (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998: 482).²²

In narratives about transformed ancestors, transformation is described in terms of metamorphosis (using the verbs *nomaLiw*, *nyoria*, *saLuh* or *nyoLung*²³) rather than in terms of animal clothing to emphasize the unintentional and irreversible character of the transformation process. Metamorphosis generally results from a breach, by the ancestor or someone else, of a ritual prohibition pertaining to a spirit-animal of the same category, most typically eating the animal's flesh. A third variant is that the transformation results simply from trespassing in a spirit domain. In such cases, the identity and specific capacities of the concerned spirits – including an ability to see these spirits as they see themselves, that is, as humans – are acquired all at once, without any apparent or explicit morphological change. This variant is exemplified in one version of the afore-mentioned story of Patih Manca of Toluk Osa, who became a *Lobahta* after his fishing-net got caught in the Melawi river. Diving to retrieve it, he found himself on the ridge of the house of a local watersnake, a female. He entered the house, married the watersnake who appeared there in human form, and later settled with her definitively. In another account, an ancestor was making austerities (*notahpa*) on the river when the banana stem on which he drifted sank in the water – and was then adopted by a *Lobahta* family. In a story of the Uut Danum of the upper Kahayan river (Danandjaya 1971: 266–267), the

ancestor met a snake which appeared to him in human form near a river shore. In this case, the ancestor temporarily retained his human appearance but became able to swallow a wild boar.²⁴

Whether the result of metamorphosis or not, people who are assimilated into a spirit domain alive are referred to as *gaip* (or *gait*), a term which also denotes disappearance or acquired invisibility. Extended to *gaip* characters, the category of transformed ancestors encompasses some anthropomorphic spirit categories in addition to the *Lobahta'* and *atang*, including protecting spirits associated with *tojahan* offering places, and some forest spirits (see the Ngaju *Gaip*-Myths collected by Schärer, 1966: 218–222, 239–245).²⁵ However, irrespective of how the transformation of the ancestors is reported to have occurred, and notwithstanding the anthropomorphic character of the spirits that they turn into, the ancestors undergo a profound mutation of their identity. Accounts of people who are gradually metamorphosed into watersnakes (see, e.g., the story of Naga Andoh in Schärer 1963: 143–144) only depict this radical alterity of transformed ancestors in a more spectacular way, consistent with an ontology that posits the body as “the great differentiator” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 479; see Descola 2005: 188). This alterity does not exclude ancestorship, however, which in this case consists precisely of that part of the ancestor (his name and identity) which remains unaffected by the process, and thus bridges the ontological gap between humans and spirits, to provide the basis of a reciprocal ritual relationship.

In contrast to transformed ancestors, who undergo a single metamorphosis to become benevolent spirit-animals, the *kotu'* – the afore-mentioned witches – are malevolent spirits who normally appear as humans and occasionally change form to harm people. *Kotu'* is the substantival form of the verb *ngotu'*, meaning literally to be, become, or act as a “spirit” (*otu'*). They may metamorphose into various animals, including different species of frogs and worms, and into stones, plants, and water (*sic*), or detach their heads from their body in order to attack living victims or their souls, or devour or take possession of unattended corpses.

Resulting from a ritual process grafted upon the natural process of death, the transformation undergone by the dead is a much more complex affair. Although death is not (under normal conditions) conceived of as a metamorphosis (*pace* Béguet 2006: 34), the dead do not differ from transformed ancestors in all respects. The change experienced by the spirit of the deceased during his journey to the land of the dead involves the above-described threshold effect, whereby crossing the boundary of a spirit domain

entails the acquisition of sensations or behaviour typical of that category of spirits. Halfway to the land of the dead, the spirit of the deceased (*Liow*) meets a character named Inai Palai Henda', who is "human on the one side and *Liow* on the other" (*koLunon siLa' Liow siLa'*). It is for her to decide if the deceased will be accepted into *Lovu' Liow* or will have to return to the world of the living (i.e., to life). This is a turning point at which the deceased realizes – later to forget it along with the memory of his surviving relatives – that he acts and feels like a *Liow*, that is, uses his left instead of right hand, takes day for night, tastes rice bran mixed with mice excrements as cooked rice, etc. In this respect, dead forebears differ from transformed and *gaip* ancestors mainly in terms of the *different* spirit domains into which they are assimilated, a point clearly outlined in Schärer's (1966: 218) definition of *gaip*.

A greater contrast results from the physical transformation of the deceased achieved by the mortuary ritual. Ritual activities centred on bones during *daLo'* aim to reconstitute the bodily integrity of the deceased, in parallel with relocating their spirits within the land of the dead. Once exhumed, bones are collected and enumerated in an orderly fashion from skull to toe or in the reverse way, so as to symbolically create a complete body.²⁶ One person usually picks up the bones from the opened grave with a bamboo claw, while another one, who turns away, "counts" (*nyiap*) the bones, i.e., the body parts. For instance:

- Which bone is that?
- The skull, lest the dead have no head.
- Which bone is that?
- The jaw, lest the dead have no jaw.
- Which bone is that?
- The neck, lest the dead have no neck.
- Which bone is that?
- The shoulder, lest the dead have no shoulder, etc.

(*nyoLat* ritual, Penekasan, 1990).

This rite of symbolic re-embodiment represents, I suggest, a final re-humanization of the dead after a period of ontological indeterminacy. The liminal period of death, as I have shown, is one of great instability for the deceased, whose bodies undergo decomposition while their newly unbounded spirits wander about with yet no place to settle. Quite naturally, various figures of spiritual or bodily alterity may then exert their attraction on – or be attracted by – them.²⁷ For example, the deceased

might be abducted by evil spirits, such as the afore-mentioned *kotu'* and *kambe'*, or the *tom(b)aLuy* which prey on women during childbirth. This risk applies foremost, but not exclusively, to situations of violent death, and precautions are taken to keep such malevolent spirits at bay during the wake for a deceased person. Among some Uut Danum subgroups (e.g., the Sehiai of the upper Serawai), parties of people wearing masks (*bukung*) which represent various forest spirits and animals rush into the house of the wake, dancing to the sound of gongs and suggesting by their aggressive behaviour that they want to take hold of the corpse. People say that often when the party leaves the house, one more *bukung* has joined their ranks, which is the *Liow*.²⁸

The deceased might also turn into animals, as illustrated by an optional ceremony held in the deceased's house a few days after burial as a prelude to *nyoLat*. Ash is placed in a plate or winnowing tray covered by a gong. After putting out the lights the *Liow* is called, and people then inspect the ash to look for prints. If such are found, their shape will indicate which animal or other being the deceased has turned into. Although traces of spirit-animals like *Lobahta'*, or tigers, plants or even humans are sometimes found, the beings most often identified in this rite are regular forest animals: snakes, deer, mouse deer, wild boars, whose flesh becomes temporarily (for a few days, weeks or months) prohibited for the deceased's relatives. It is not clear whether metamorphosis might create a helping spirit in this case, as it does when ancestors turn into spirit-animals while alive or when, as among the Layar Iban, recently deceased people appear in the form of snakes (Béguet, this volume).²⁹ Whatever the result yielded by this divinatory rite, it does not affect the progress of mortuary rituals or the possibility of arranging a *daLo'* for the deceased in the future. To explain how the deceased could become an animal and yet receive full mortuary treatment, informants often resorted to a notion of multiple souls: people have seven *morua'*, they said; some of them are transformed into animals or plants, while the other die and go to the land of the dead as *Liow*.³⁰

One of the deceased's possessions or body parts, or the liquids dripping from his decomposing corpse, might also turn into a stone charm (*pocihan*, *koruhoy*). Some people keep stones said to originate from the tongues of deceased relatives (*bahtu' joLa'*), which have been metamorphosed at the moment of their death or found in the earth when their grave was dug. Such charms are considered both as transformations of the dead and as gifts from them.³¹ Similar charms may be produced when *Liow* appear in the

monstrous form of the earlier mentioned *Liow ngirat*. If one manages to seize the apparition, it turns into a stone.

It is not until their bones are ritually recollected and placed in the *kodiring* that the identity of the deceased is stabilized and made immune to transformation. According to Ngaju beliefs reported by Hans Schärer (1966: 403, 148), scraps of bones remaining on cremation sites (i.e., leftovers of the secondary treatment) may be transformed into deer and other forest animals, hence a prohibition on eating the flesh of animals of these species during the three months following *tiwah*. This belief demonstrates the restricted ability of mortuary ritual to withdraw the dead from a general process of animic transformation to which even their bones may be subjected, in order to make the bones into symbols of their re-embodiment as humans. Indeed, exhumation might reveal, or even trigger, the metamorphosis of the exhumed. According to an account of *hantuen* witches among the Kahayan Ngaju (Schiller 1997: 92–93), the identity of some characters as witches is revealed upon exhuming the remains of their deceased child. Instead of human bones, what one discovers in the child's grave are fish scales and squirrel fur, corresponding to the original animal identity of the child's parents. In another version of the same story (Danandjaya 1971: 269–271), the witch's bones turn into animal bones *after* having been exhumed and cremated – but *before* being placed in a mausoleum.

Asked why the Uut Danum witch ordeal could only be held at a bone repository, one informant suggested that since *kotu'* (witches) have a propensity to “eat other people” (*kuman injah*), a real *kotu'* would inevitably attempt to eat the bones contained in the *kodiring*.³² To this explanation, which suggests that the deceased remain vulnerable to spirit assault even after secondary placement, we may add another. Secondary mortuary rituals impart to bones a symbolic power to represent *and authenticate* the humanity of the deceased, allowing the re-embodied dead of the *kodiring* to unmask the hidden identity of beings who lack human bones under their human bodily envelope. As Schiller observes, the mobilization of images associated with witches in secondary mortuary rituals provoke participants “to reflect on the certainty and essence of their own humanity” (1997: 107).

Thus, mortuary ritual does not conform to the logic of animism characterized by anthropomorphism and the mutability of bodily forms. It instead follows a distinct *anthropocentric* logic, according to which humanity is purposively fixed and defined absolutely in negation to both “real” animals and animal-like beings living in human form in their own domains

(transformed ancestors), as well as human-like beings who are zoomorphic spirits in disguise (witches).³³ In other words, the ancestral status achieved by the dead in mortuary ritual involves a reversal of the value of ontological hybridism. This characteristic positively defines transformed ancestors as helping spirits, but in mortuary rituals, which seek to establish an unmixed humanity of the deceased at the bone repository, it is negatively valued.

The dead nevertheless revert to a cycle of animic transformation eventually. Bones fall to pieces, bone repositories collapse, and after dying again in the land of the dead (seven times according to some informants and Kühr 1896–97, VII: 67), the spirits of the deceased come back to the human world in the form of various wild plant species, several of which have the peculiarity of producing sour or pungent fruit that are especially savoured by pregnant women (for similar ideas among other Borneans and Indonesians, see Hertz 1960a: 60–61, Sather and Sillander, this volume). In this way physical resemblances between children and their forebears are accounted for. As indicated by the expressions used to describe this process – “to return into” (*buLi’ noku*), “to dissolve oneself” (*mopoLonyuh arop*, Epplé n.d. 2: 7) – this ultimate transformation of the deceased is not conceived of as a metamorphosis, but rather as an assimilation of the spirit of the dead into these plants.³⁴

While the reincarnation of the deceased long after death may appear as the final outcome of the *natural* process of death, it should be stressed again that this is not an intended result of mortuary rituals. Neither do the latter aim to resurrect the dead (Hertz 1960a: 135, fn. 174) – although they do re-embody them – nor to bestow immortality on them in the afterworld (Schiller 1997: 105), notwithstanding that bone repositories represent, or used to represent, the permanence of house groups. Indeed, it may be argued that the process of transforming the dead into symbols of “pure” humanity and genealogical integrity implies neutralizing all forms of vitality associated with them. Unlike many tombs and other material embodiments of dead ancestors which function as symbols of continuity for Austronesian social groups (Bloch and Parry 1982: 34, Bloch 1982: 212, Molnar 2000: 203), Uut Danum bone repositories are not storehouses of life-generating potency. While bones symbolize the shared ancestry of the members of *kodiring*-owning groups,³⁵ they do not represent a “principle of life.” In this respect the Uut Danum differ markedly also from the Punan Bah of Sarawak (Nicolaisen 2003), whose exhumation practices are informed by notions of a potency contained in bones which can be tapped and enables the rebirth of the deceased in their descendants.

Apical Ancestors, Immortality, and Descent

The Uut Danum trace their origin to heavenly ancestors who descended to earth on elevated points near the headwaters of the Lekawai, Samba, Ambalau, Kahayan, Joloi, and other rivers in the Schwaner mountain range which separates the provinces of West and Central Kalimantan. By marrying among themselves or with pre-existing earthly human people, these ancestors founded a number of descent lines (*uhtus*) through which the various Uut Danum subgroups trace their origins (e.g., the Dohoi, Penanyoi, Tebuoi, Sehiai, Uut Melahui, Kolangan, Pangin, to mention some subgroups of the Melawi area). The literature mentions several variants of this myth of ethnogenesis which the Uut Danum share with some of their downstream neighbours.³⁶ The following is a summary of a variant told by the upper Lekawai Uut Danum in West Kalimantan.

Lanying Suling and his sister Kasiang (“Drongo”) were lowered from the sky on a golden offering tray (*poLahka’ buLow*) which landed on the Dahtah Kasiang plateau at the upper Lekawai. Kasiang married a man named Jalung and bore two sons, Buhtih and Kahung. Having once taken his two nephews to a net fishing party, Lanying Suling ordered them to cook *soLuang* fish (*Rasbora sp.*) in such a way that none of the fish should be burnt nor bent. At a loss as to how to comply with their uncle’s demand, the young boys decided to roast the fish on hot stones, throwing the burnt and bent ones back into the river, where they gave rise to endemic *soLuang* species with a burnt or bent appearance. When Lanying Suling came and saw the outstretched roasted *soLuang*, he laughed and shouted cheerfully because it conformed exactly to his desire. Upon hearing their uncle’s laughter, however, which resembled the scream of some fierce animal or evil spirit, Buhtih and Kahung thought he was a witch (*kotu’*) and decided to kill him, which they accomplished successfully. Brought back to life by his celestial parents with *danum kohoringan boLum*, the heavenly life-giving water, Lanying Suling killed his nephews in retaliation. To escape vengeance by his brother-in-law, Lanying Suling sailed off to Java where a contest opposed him to the king of Majapahit to determine who of the two was of highest descent. The two contestants were placed in wooden coffins which were then burnt. The coffin containing Lanying Suling burst open first, liberating Lanying Suling who turned into a hawk and ascended to the upperworld from

where he was lowered again – seven times altogether – to found new lines (*nguhtus*) in other rivers. The king of Majapahit also turned into a hawk which flew downwards into the sea and became a watersnake (*Lobahta*). Before setting out to kill his nephews, Lanying Suling planted his plucked lute in the ground and took an oath so that it would become a stone *tojahan* where his future descendants could make vows and offerings in case of need. Located near a former village site on the upper Lekawai river, the *tojahan* of the lute-stone (*tojahan bahtu' konyahpi*) is still used today by local inhabitants who trace their ancestry to Lanying Suling through the children born to his sister Kasiang after her brother's departure.

This story contains all the elements commonly occurring in narratives about transformed ancestors: the violation of ritual prohibitions, the metamorphosis, the separation between the ancestor and his descendants, the ancestor cult. To these elements, the story, like other descent myths, adds immortality, an attribute which the apical ancestors possess because of originating from the upperworld beings (*uLun Langit*), who represent a super-humanity with unlimited access to the most valued goods: jars, rice, life.³⁷ However, immortality, symbolized by the heavenly Water of Life (*danum kohoringan boLum*), is lost for the Uut Danum in the course of the mythical events. While Lanying Suling is resurrected with the Water of Life and ascends to the sky to resume his immortal life, the death of the nephews on earth is final, as is that of Sahavung's child in the descent myth of the Jengonoi river Uut Danum. In this other myth, the Water of Life fetched from the upperworld proves ineffective to bring the child back to life due to the mother's non-observance of the instruction given by the apical ancestor not to weep over the child's body.³⁸

Let us have a closer look at what brings about the death of Buhtih and Kahung in this story, whence also results the line founder's definitive departure. By killing their uncle, the two boys commit the gravest conceivable offence against a parent of ascending generation. This defilement of the value of descent is sanctioned by their own death inflicted by the immortal Lanying Suling. Two elements in this story are more decisive, however, in investing it with its character as a foundation myth. The first is the non-observance by the children of the ritual prohibitions (*paLi*) set by their uncle for the preparation of the fish. This is a consistent theme of mythical narratives: the upperworld people can no longer mix with humans because

they disapprove of the latter's ways, the domestic animals living around them, the fact that they commit adultery, and, especially, the fact that they eat tabooed food (grilled fish and vegetables, in particular). Once the separation has occurred, the adoption and observance of such *paLi'* becomes a precondition for maintaining ritual relations with the upperworld ancestors. In this process the ritual prohibitions acquire a double dimension, as means to ensure the efficacy of an alliance with powerful spirits, and as symbols of descent links to particular apical ancestors. Thus the descendants of Lanying Suling share, at least in theory, the prohibition on roasting *soLuang* fish, while those of Sahavung share a prohibition on consuming the large *dungan* fish species, which was brought back by the ancestor from the sky as a pet for his daughter. In practice, the significance of inherited taboos as descent markers is limited by their multiplication resulting from intermarriages between descent lines and from new alliances with ancestral and other spirits creating new prohibitions as generations pass, and a converse phenomenon whereby prohibitions are gradually abandoned. Nevertheless, many people respect some number of ancestral taboos which are said to run in their descent lines (*koturun*).

The second element of the story establishing it as a foundation myth relates to the very definition of humanity. In wrongly inferring from the strange behaviour of their uncle that he is a witch (*kotu'*), Buhtih and Kahung transgress another fundamental distinction, mistaking the animality of their ancestor, which is actually encompassed by his humanity, for that of witches which is opposed to humanity (*kotu'* are seen as malevolent spirits *disguised* as humans).

With the death of the nephews and the departure of Lanying Suling, we therefore move from a general state of undifferentiation between this world and the upperworld, descendants and ascendants, humanity and animality, and between humans who are disrespectful of ritual prohibitions and upperworld people who abide by them, to a state in which these distinctions are respected and explicitly made asymmetrical. In the resulting ideological order the central value of descent is segmented (Dumont 1982). As epitomized by the apical ancestors, ancestry involves immortality and ontological hybridism (a doubly human and animal status). In its inherited form, handed down by the mortal Uut Danum, it lacks these two attributes. Moreover, ancestry entails a reversal of value in the context of secondary mortuary rituals, where humanity becomes superior to and exclusive of animality. The two unfortunate young protagonists of the story pay, as it

were, for conflating the two levels of the ideological structure, that is, for interpreting apical ancestorship in terms of human ancestorship.

The nephews are not entirely wrong, however, for perceiving a dark side in Lanying Suling's personality. The episode of the cooking of the fish may indeed be interpreted on two different levels. The first refers to the dominant facet of the apical ancestor as genealogical ancestor and introducer of ritual taboos: Lanying Suling laughs to manifest his satisfaction that his instructions have been followed. However, as we know, the nephews have used a stratagem and the rules have in fact been violated. Hence the second level of interpretation according to which Lanying Suling acts in a capacity of *guardian of the taboo* that he introduced earlier, whose violation actually prompts his metamorphosis into a vengeful spirit-animal. Other narratives and beliefs suggest that apical ancestors take the specific form of tiger-spirits to sanction the same transgression on roasting certain types of foodstuff. Thus, while witches represent the negative aspect of metamorphosis and animality, the animality of apical ancestors has both a positive aspect, exemplified for instance by their role as augural hawks, and a negative aspect, exemplified by this function of ancestral spirit-animals avenging ritual transgressions.³⁹

The value of descent, and its validation as an asymmetrical relationship, finds its major ritual expression in the concept of *tuLah*. *TuLah*, a term of Arab origin, is a close equivalent of the ancient Western Malayo-Polynesian **busung* taboo, which it has probably supplanted among the Uut Danum. Like the latter, it punishes an "offense against status" (Blust 1981: 293). The way *tuLah* works can be compared to an electric short-circuit: when two elements of unequal status or force are brought together, it strikes the inferior one to restore the initial gap. Depending on context and on the width of the gap, *tuLah* results in various symptoms, including uncontrolled defecation, lividness, sudden death, and more generally in an incapacity of the victims of *tuLah* to make a living. The concept of *tuLah* governs two spheres of relations that basically correspond to the two contexts of ancestorship outlined here. The first is represented by human relations with upperworld, and to a lesser extent underworld, beings. One becomes susceptible to *tuLah* when dreaming of prominent upperworld or underworld spirits, plaiting certain motifs representing them, purchasing or telling the history of high-ranking jars (*boLanga'*) originating from them, etc. The other is the sphere of asymmetric interpersonal relationships. In the oral literature, *tuLah* may arise from a lack of acknowledgement of differences in age,

wealth, experience, and most importantly, pedigree. In a poignant scene of the *tahtum* epic, the ancestral heroes Tambun and Bungai strike the final blow upon their enemies Lunjan and Kandang, who are respectively sons of the king of the sun and the underworld spirit Jahta'. Before dying, Lunjan and Kandang curse the two heroes to become *tuLah* for spilling their royal blood. However, Bungai and Tambun, themselves born of adulterous unions of human mothers with powerful upperworld and underworld characters, reply that they will not become *tuLah* since they are of no less noble descent than their enemies.

In daily life, the principal cause of *tuLah* is disrespect towards senior relatives. In this context, *tuLah* serves to maintain the proper distance between generations, particularly with respect to sexual intercourse and marriage. Marriage ideally takes place between same-generation cognatic relatives. All inter-generational marriages are potentially *tuLah*, whether between close relatives – in which case they are additionally considered incestuous and therefore prohibited – or more distant kin, or even people only related through links to others who are affinally related between themselves. In the latter case, a fine must be paid by the marrying couple for “squeezing in” (*kahtop*) these other people between contradictory genealogical positions. This wide range of marriage restrictions manifests the importance of the principle of generation for ordering social relations (cf. Schiller 1997: 99–100). The risk of *tuLah* features centrally also in secondary mortuary rituals, in connection with activities such as pounding rice for the dead of ascendant generations, cooking their food, or cleaning and interring their bones. For this reason these tasks are either entrusted to genealogical elders (of the same or higher generations than the deceased), or associated with ritual precautions if performed by members of lower generations.

Stones, Bones, and Jars

In the recounted myth of ethnogenesis, Lanying Suling not only founded a descent line, he also founded a *tojahan* (Figure 3.3). *Tojahan*, also often referred as *bahtu' potahu'*, are community offering places consisting of one or several erect stones surrounded by small wooden effigies and, often, a *divung* palm-tree (*Oncosperma filamentosum*) or cordyline shrub. They are usually located near villages, or in more remote parts of the forest near ancient settlements, but some families possess their own *tojahan* erected in front of their house in the village. *Tojahan* belong to a category of community shrines

which formerly played an important role in Uut Danum and Ngaju social and religious life in connection with headhunting, rice agriculture, lawsuits, epidemics, secondary burials, auguries, etc. (Klokke 2004, Kuhnt-Saptodewo 1993, Kühr 1896–97, Maiullari 2004, Mallinckrodt 1924–25, Schärer 1963, 1966, Schiller 1997). Only part of this importance has been retained by the West Kalimantan Uut Danum. Some authors have claimed that *tojahan* and similar village shrines were dedicated to a cult of the ancestors.⁴⁰

Many *tojahan* have a known founder, often a transformed or *gaip* ancestor and sometimes a celestial ancestor like Lanying Suling, who is also frequently considered as the apical ancestor of the local community. However, practices involving the *tojahan* do not amount to a cult of the *tojahan* founder strictly speaking. The *tojahan's* *modus operandi* is to contact the tutelary spirit, or “person” (*koLunon*) of the *tojahan* (also referred to as *kan(d)an tojahan*), to ask it to act as an intermediary in relations with powerful spirits, such as *Lobahta'* or *jiin*, to which vows (*hajaj*) are made to enable a good farming year, successful expeditions to collect forest products, the curing of illnesses, etc. In the event that the request is met, offerings are brought to the *tojahan* to fulfil the vow (*moruput hajaj*), an occasion on which new effigies or stones may be erected at the shrine. However, this tutelary spirit of the *tojahan* is distinct from the founding ancestor's spirit. Technically, it is the spirit of the original erect stone(s), which also represents the link with the founder. In accordance with Kenneth Sillander's observations on what he labels “ancestral objects” among the Bentian, the *tojahan* stone often stands in a metonymical relationship with the founding ancestor (2004: 220). For example, the stone may have appeared to the founder in a dream, or it may originate from an object belonging to the founder (like Lanying Suling's plucked lute), or an animal killed by the founder, or even, as with a Ngaju *tajahan* that I observed on the lower Samba river in Central Kalimantan, from the murdered founder's own head.

The example of this last-mentioned Ngaju shrine erected around a petrified ancestor's skull, which notably is not the sole example of its kind in south Borneo,⁴¹ points to an interesting contrast between *tojahan* offering places and *kodiring* bone repositories. We have seen how mortuary rituals remove the bones of the deceased from the process of animic transformation. In the case of the petrified skull, however, metamorphosis on the contrary removes the skull of an ancestor from the mortuary process – and from the rest of his body – and transforms it into a stone which becomes the focus of cult activities. Decisive in this process is thus less the metonymical



Figure 3.3. The *tojahan* of the plucked-lute stone built by the apical ancestor Lanying Suling. Upper Lekawai river. Detail showing the plucked-lute stone (*bahtu' konyahpi'*).

association between the stone and the founder than the severance of this link with the founder through the petrification of his skull.

At the same time, as places of origin associated with settlement founders, *tojahan* also appear as the “master-reliquaries” from where family mausoleums derive their symbolic capacity to represent the continuity of ancestral origins. To illustrate this element of continuity, but also of contrast, between these two categories of ancestral sanctuaries, and between the forms of ancestorship associated with them, let us briefly turn once again to the *tahtum* epic, to a story relating how the young Bungai is blessed by the apical ancestor of his paternal line with a supernatural gift.

At the beginning of this story, the miserable Bungai is alone and starving in the village Tapang, abandoned there by his in-laws who have rejected him because of his filthy appearance and asocial behaviour. Disturbed by Bungai's incessant weeping, his deceased father-in-law, “*Liow*” Likit, talks to him from inside the village bone repository, offering to reward him with jars and other riches if he stops crying. Pretending to accept the offer, Bungai persuades the ghost to make himself visible and to come down from the bone repository. He then attempts to kill him with his sword and strikes repeatedly the *kodiring*'s poles with an axe – a major ritual offence likely to attract *tuLah* on whoever commits it. Likit complains to Sepung, the deceased father of Bungai, who in turn comes to the *kodiring* and makes a similar offer to his son to the same effect, asking him to stop destroying the “house” of his deceased father-in-law in exchange for gifts. Trusting no more his own father than his father-in-law – assumedly because they are both *Liow* – Bungai attacks Sepung with his sword. Sepung subsequently summons his own father, Lambung, to request his help in the matter, with the same result. Lambung's father, Sobila' Nakui Kolatung (“Sobila' wearing a gong as hat”), who is then called, is no more successful. The last to be summoned, Atang Bojola' Bulou (“the hawk with golden tongue”), who is Sobila's father and the apical ancestor of the line – as well as a hawk – offers to give Bungai a beautiful and large house with storerooms full of jars and gongs. Bungai accepts his gift – “because this one is true” – and follows his ancestor to this wonderful house which is none other than the *tojahan* located downriver from the village.

The apical ancestor, who in the descent myth of Lanying Suling was depicted as a cultural hero in contrast to both mortal humans and animalized

witches, appears in this story as a benefactor in contrast to the deceitful and debilitating dead. The *tojahan*, as the house of the apical ancestor, is here counterposed to the bone repository, which is the house of dead forebears.⁴² But the story also clearly illustrates how the bone repository symbolically serves to enable the protagonist to climb, step by step, up the genealogical ladder to the apical ancestor, and how the latter, the *tojahan* founder, stands for the whole line of his deceased descendants.

The missionary ethnologist Hans Schärer noted the same type of relation between the Ngaju *tajahan* and the collectivity of the ancestors, or “sacred dead” (1963: 147–152). Based on the fact that some Katingan river Ngaju and Uut Danum in Central Kalimantan set up new effigies at the shrine for each deceased person after secondary mortuary rituals – a practice unknown to the Uut Danum of the upper Melawi – Schärer claimed that deceased ancestors are contacted as a totality at the *tajahan* and that “they manifest themselves in the form of the *antang*, hawk,” which is the tutelary spirit of the shrine (*antang ganan tajahan*). In other words, the tutelary hawk-spirit of the *tajahan* was for Schärer an impersonation, or hypostasis, of the totality of the dead. However, this interpretation is, at least strictly speaking, incorrect, since the only figure that actually is hypostasized as a hawk, and the *tojahan*’s patron, is the apical ancestor. By equating the apical ancestor and the dead in this manner, Schärer conflated two contexts or spheres of ancestorship which should be clearly differentiated. As the previous story suggests, there is indeed a sort of encompassing relationship between the *tojahan* and the *kodiring*, between the *tojahan* founder and the dead, but it is of the Dumontian type whereby unity on one level does not preclude – and actually implies – contradiction on another. Because dead forebears are *qualitatively* different – mortal and restrictively human – they cannot reasonably, as the story also illustrates, be merged with apical ancestors in a single figure. Nor is it correct, as Schärer claimed, to take myths about transformed ancestors as evidence that the dead – indeed all the dead – “formerly” changed into hawks and watersnakes (1963: 143). But this is not to say that they do not, on their own level, represent the value of ancestry, as I have shown in this chapter.

However, there is a third category of ancestral objects which transcends this division of ancestral spheres by connecting the Uut Danum simultaneously to their remote celestial origins and their close dead forebears. This category consists of valuable porcelain jars of Chinese origin (*jaot*) and various types of charms that are transmitted along bilateral descent lines as

part of the estate traditionally held by multi-family houses. Like the *tojahan* shrines, heirloom jars and family charms are associated with agency and a “person” (*koLunon*). The heirloom jars are even attributed with a life soul (*morua*), and have the ability to protect and bring luck to their owners. Significantly, as noted in respect to the charms originating from the recent dead, these objects often result from metamorphosis.⁴³ The highest-ranking jars (*boLanga*) are those made by Songumang and his father in the upper-world. In oral literature and ritual chants, Songumang’s father, the highest upperworld spirit whose personal name cannot be pronounced without incurring *tuLah*, is represented as dwelling in a *boLanga* jar. During rituals, offerings of food are placed on the necks of *boLanga* wares for their “master” (*tépun*) Songumang and other “people above” (*uLun diang*). Some of these jars, according to the stories recounting their origin, emerged from the rivers, originating, for instance, from the horns or bodies of watersnakes into which upperworld beings had been metamorphosed (see Couderc 2012, Klokke 1994, for illustrations of this theme in iconography and oral literature).

Heirloom jars also feature prominently in several contexts of mortuary rituals, during which their significance switches from an association with death and the deceased to an association with life and the living. First, jars,



Figure 3.4. Heirloom jars (*jaot*) displayed upon a cage containing pigs to be sacrificed during a secondary mortuary celebration. Jengonoi river.

although usually not the most expensive ones, are used as containers for bones stored in bone repositories. This is illustrated also in the descent myth of Sahavung, in which the apical ancestor entombed his dead child in a *boLanga'* jar brought down from the sky, which later turned into stone. Second, jars surround the deceased during the wake for the corpse; they are brought along with the corpse to the graveyard, and displayed, along with *tom(b)oLang* family charms, upon the cages containing pigs sacrificed during post-burial rites (*nyoLat*) and secondary mortuary rituals (*daLo'*) (see Figure 3.4). Some ritual sequences and formulas suggest that they actually serve as dwelling places for the deceased (as *Liow*) from burial until the sacrifices, which take place in the open space in front of the house of the deceased and constitute a turning point in the whole ritual. While the pigs and other sacrificial victims exhale their last breaths and leave for the land of the dead along with an invisible counterpart (*Liow*) of the jars, the actual, visible jars and family charms cross the life–death boundary in the reverse direction. Brought back into the deceased's house, these objects go through exactly the same ritual operations as those undergone by the deceased's relatives to mark the end of mourning. First they are purified from evil influences, then smeared with blood from sacrificed pigs to “cool” (*nyorongin*) them and enhance their potency (and the vitality of the mourners). Finally, they are fed with cooked rice and selected parts of the sacrificed animals.

Exhumed bones, on the other hand, which stand on the opposite side of the life–death boundary, and which are not attributed with any “people” of their own, although associated with the *Liow* of the deceased, are *not* smeared with blood before being placed in mausoleums. However, a sign of their status as ancestral objects of another category is the fact that they must be smeared with vegetable oil, a treatment also awarded to heirloom jars and human participants during *daLo'* and other rituals. In the past, the skulls of outstanding warriors and chiefs were sometimes separated from the rest of their remains after *daLo'* to be stored in precious jars or other containers inside family houses, or, as reported by informants for the former upper Kahayan regional chief Damang Batu, in a special outdoor repository. From the sparse information obtained on this practice, of which only a couple of contemporary instances were reported to me for the whole upper Melawi area,⁴⁴ it appears that these ancestor skulls function as charms (*pocihan*) which can provide omens and be propitiated. In major life and death rituals (*daLo'*, *nyakay*, weddings), they are taken out of their containers, smeared

anew with oil and blood, and presented with food. Clearly then, by being separated from the other bones stored at the bone repository, the ancestor's skull undergoes a radical shift of its ritual status which makes it analogous with the petrified skull of *tojahan* founders, and, even more, with the valuable jars and family charms, like which it serves as an heirloom (*pusaka*).

Valuable jars, and to a lesser extent these other *pusaka*, thus pertain to both contexts of ancestorship outlined in this chapter, one associated with apical and transformed ancestors, another with deceased "house ancestors" (Helms 1998). As objects originating from upperworld beings which are inherited from dead forebears, as symbols of life *and* of death (see Roth 1992), as products of metamorphosed animal bodies serving as receptacles for human bones, jars combine the dimensions that define these two contexts of ancestorship. Like the concept of *tuLah*, they symbolize descent as a unified principle whose value, transmitted through generations of genealogical forebears, ultimately rests with the upperworldly apical ancestors. It is now more clear why *boLanga'* jars may potentially attract *tuLah* on their owners. An offense against heirloom jars would, to paraphrase Robert Blust (1981: 293), be "tantamount to an offense against [the] descent line and ultimately its apical representatives, the [upperworldly] ancestors."

Conclusion

Describing the cult of the ancestors, such as practiced in West Africa or China, as the most conspicuous manifestation of a mode of relation characterized by the domination of the dead over the living by means of filiation, Philippe Descola observes that this kind of accepted dependence upon more or less remote ascendants is totally foreign to Amazonian Indians and other animistic peoples around the world. The very idea of ancestors seems odd in Amazonia, where the dead are expelled from the society of the living as soon as possible and transmit very little, in the way of material or spiritual assets, to their descendants (2005: 450–455).

These opposite attitudes towards the dead correspond to differences of an ontological order. While animism posits a "sociological discontinuity between live humans and dead humans" that is often expressed by the transformation of the dead into animals and other figures of bodily alterity, "religions based on the cult of the ancestors seem to postulate the inverse: spiritual identity goes beyond the bodily barrier of death, the living and

the dead are similar in so far as they manifest the same spirit" (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 482, 485 fn. 19).

However, as noted by Mary Helms (1998: 44–46), such antithetic conceptions of humanity and otherness, respectively "anthropomorphic" and "anthropocentric," to use Viveiros de Castro's distinction, or "animic" and "analogic," in Descola's terms, appear to be combined in the conceptualizations of ancestors found in many societies, reflecting the social and cosmological transformations that occurred when hunting and gathering peoples settled down. According to Helms, many settled societies recognize, as a result of these transformations, two categories of ancestors which in a complementary way connect them to their ultimate cosmological origins. First, a category of "creator" or "first-principle" ancestors, representing these origins and expressing what may be called a persisting animistic worldview, and second, one of "house" ancestors consisting of close genealogical ancestors and expressing a socio-centric worldview, which emerged upon sedentarization. While house ancestors are most notably produced through mortuary rituals as a "temporal elaboration" of the enduring units to which they belong, the living membership of which gives rise with each generation to a new ancestral offshoot (1998: 37), first-principle ancestors are initially located outside society, both in time (preceding the house instead of emerging from it) and space (originating, for instance, as immigrants or upperworld beings), and they are "brought into closer contact with it through relational imagery that . . . is usually distinctly 'contractual' rather than 'processual' (emergent) in form" (1998: 40). Ancestorship centred on relations with first-principle ancestors involves the humanization of ontological outsiders, in the two often combined forms of affinal ancestors (e.g., ancestors conceived of as "fathers-in-law") and "totemic" (i.e., animal) ancestors (1998: 40–41).

This chapter has illustrated how these opposed forms of ancestorship among the swidden-cultivating Uut Danum are accommodated within a single ideological structure through the contextual hierarchization of their ontological premises. Among the Uut Danum, unlike in other societies conforming to Helms's dual model of ancestorship, "house ancestors" have limited agency and do not much influence people outside the context of mortuary rituals, a situation which presumably reflects the modest size, limited life-span, and weak integrative function of Uut Danum house groups. Their predominantly symbolic importance is expressed through bone repositories, which materialize short chains of bilateral descent links stemming from house founders. Structurally, the bones of these ancestral

dead are opposed to the living bodies of selected ancestors who undergo metamorphosis into spirit-animals, giving rise to a second category of ancestors whose prototypical representatives are the upperworldly founders and apical ancestors of *uhtus* categories. I have argued that the relative lack of ritual importance of the spirits of the dead, including their virtual absence from the system of vows and vow-redeeming, and the corresponding importance in this system of metamorphosed ancestors and other spirits originating as human beings who in some way or another *escaped death*, is congruent with an ideology which consistently stresses the antagonism between life and death.

Figure 3.5 summarizes the main elements of contrast and complementarity between these two forms of ancestorship, one which arises from ritual transformation and expresses a house-centred view of social relations, and another which arises from animic transformation and “references cosmological first-principles” (Helms 1998: 38). Secondary mortuary rituals, and more particularly the secondary treatment of the remains of the dead, play a pivotal role in articulating these two contexts of ancestorship and integrating their opposed ontological premises within an encompassing ideology of

HOUSE ANCESTORS	APICAL/TRANSFORMED ANCESTORS
Close genealogical forebears	Distant mythical ancestors
Define house/village (<i>Lovu</i>) identity	Define ethnic/sub-ethnic (<i>uhtus</i>) identity
Mortal	Immortal
Restrictively human	Both human and animal
Not sources of blessings (except in secondary mortuary rituals)	Sources of blessings
Connected to the living through: Relationships of obligation centred on performance of mortuary rituals	Connected to the living through: Contractual relationships centred on vows and vow-redeeming
Associated with: Bone repositories Heirloom jars	Associated with: <i>Tojahan</i> shrines Heirloom jars
Humanity contradicts animality	Humanity encompasses animality
Descent encompasses alliance	Alliance encompasses descent

Figure 3.5. Categories of ancestors and value reversals.

ancestry. These rites confer on house ancestors a fixed and unambiguously human identity, thus imposing an anthropocentric ontology at odds with an animism characterized by anthropomorphism and mutable identities and physical forms. Moreover, they assert the *superiority* of this restrictedly defined humanity over the human-cum-animal identity of apical and transformed ancestors, which in the context of house ancestorship is negatively valued as a defining characteristic of witches.

Another reversal notable in a comparison of the two contexts of ancestorship, respectively focused on house ancestors and transformed/apical ancestors, pertains to descent and alliance, which are contrarily valued in these contexts. Relations with transformed and apical ancestors are essentially *ritual alliances* which are maintained conditionally through adherence to inherited taboos, and activated through a system of vows and vow-redeeming whose contractual character contrasts with the sense of more unconditional moral obligation prevailing in relations with house ancestors. Descent is here ancillary to alliance, and it makes no difference for the Uut Danum when invoking, for instance, a *Lobahta'* village guardian-spirit, whether this *Lobahta'* is of ancestral origin (i.e., a transformed ancestor) or not. What counts is the inherited alliance with the spirit and the benefits it brings with it. Transformed ancestors are only a special case of such alliances with spirits, in which the ancestor, by *becoming* the ontological Other, himself embodies the alliance relationship. The primacy of alliance over descent in this context is also expressed by the fact, also observed by Helms, that apical ancestors are often described in affinal (like the childless Sahavung), or lateral (like the avuncular Lanying Suling), rather than lineal genealogical terms. However, when the same powerful beings serve to reference the origins of house groups, villages, or sub-ethnic categories, the relationship is reversed: descent encompasses alliance, and the Uut Danum can draw on the classificatory properties of cognatic kinship to trace ancestry from such lateral or affinal ancestors. Descent similarly encompasses alliance as a principle governing admittance to bone repositories, allowing entry for affinal forebears on the basis of their spouse's descent links to the *kodiring's* founder.

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Notes

1 The Uut Danum (Ot Danum) are shifting cultivators living on both sides of the Schwaner mountains in the Indonesian provinces of West and Central Kalimantan. In West Kalimantan, they inhabit the upper reaches of the Melawi river and some of its tributaries (Gilang, Ambalau, Lekawai, Serawai), totalling around 18,000 people in 2006, including the closely related and rapidly assimilating Sehiyai of the upper Serawai (see Avé, King, and de Wit 1983, Couderc 1988, Sellato 1986). A larger number reside in Central Kalimantan, mainly at the headwaters of the Barito, Kapuas, Kahayan and Samba rivers (Avé 1972). On these rivers, their downstream neighbours are various Ngaju groups with which they share close similarities in language, oral literature, and ritual.

2 Similar beliefs and stories, often presented under the heading of totemism by early writers, are reported from other Borneo peoples (Evans 1923: 40, 76–80, Hose and Mc Dougall 1912, II: 76–78, 81–82, 110–111, Kershaw 2000: 65–66, Metcalf 1982: 188). See in particular the Dusun legend of Aki Gahuk (Evans 1923: 76–78), whose gradual metamorphosis into a crocodile is strikingly similar to the pattern described in Uut Danum narratives.

3 See Béguet in this volume and 2006, particularly chap. 5 which presents several cases of deceased persons metamorphosed into animals, mostly snakes, which act as helping spirits (*petara*) for their descendants.

4 Vernacular terms (in the Dohoi dialect) are noted according to the following conventions: *L* is a palatal lateral flap (see Hudson 1967: 36); *v* is a voiced bilabial spirant ("ß"); *w* and *y* are final diphthongs; *aa*, *uu*, etc. are lengthened vowels; the schwa is noted *o* (e.g. *morua'*, *poLahka'*); *m(b)* and *n(d)* denote slightly audible postploded consonants (e.g. *tom(b)oLang*, *kan(d)an*). For toponyms, personal names, and other unitalicized names, the transcription follows standard Indonesian spelling.

5 In this respect, the Uut Danum differ from the Berawan of central north Borneo, who mention in their prayers spirits of past ancestors in a collective and anonymous way, in addition to spirits of individually named ancestors (Metcalf 1982: 24).

6 *Ajuh* and *umbuh* are often used interchangeably or replaced by *tahtu'*. Of still rarer use is *hiang*, which theoretically designates ascendants above the fourth generation.

7 It may be worth noting that this classificatory merging of same-generation ascendants is compatible with a genealogical definition of ancestry. When an ancestor term is applied to a non-lineal ascendant, the genealogical referent of this term (i.e., the progenitor) obviously exists in the person of one (or several) more remote ancestor, who may be known or unknown. By contrast, when the same term is applied to an affinal relative of same generation, this seems to result either from the logical operation of classifying relatives by generation level, or from an extension of a genealogical relationship to a non-genealogical relative. However, the Uut Danum have a strong preference for the marriage of cousins, so that, ideally if not always actually, affinal ascendants are also genealogical ascendants.

8 Such famous forebears, especially former community leaders bearing Malay titles also provide landmarks in the memory of individual families. Doing genealogical enquiries in the upper Lekawai river, I noticed that whereas precise knowledge of genealogical links rarely went beyond the generation of grandparents, people would often be able to trace descent from a *Tomakung*, *Raden* or *Singa* who was, for example, their great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather, or a grandparent's cousin or in-law.

9 The inclusion of the dead in the generic category of *otu'* warrants translating *Liow* as "spirit" rather than as "soul." This rendering is also meant to stress the difference with the term *morua'*, which refers to only one among several components of the living person, whereas *Liow* represents the dead as a unitary person (cf. Schärer 1966: 682, 842).

10 Other conceptions of the condition and whereabouts of the deceased's spirit during the liminal period, which cannot be detailed here, include the belief in a temporary stay of *Liow* awaiting *daLo'* at Mount Muluh, located to the west of the Lekawai river. A picture of the progressive estrangement of the spirit of the deceased during that period is provided by the location of food offerings (*pacuh*) at successive stages of the mortuary ritual. During the wake, *pacuh* is hung above the corpse, first in the bedroom, and later in the guest-room or gallery of the house when the corpse is moved there; at *nosang* it is secured above the outside door; at *nyoLat* it is slipped through wall slats and dropped outside of the house (hence the name of the ritual, which literally means "to slip"); finally at *daLo'*, offerings for the dead are brought to the bone repository or the grave depending on whether the remains have been exhumed or not.

11 Customary law obligates the widow or widower to celebrate a *daLo'* for their deceased spouse prior to remarrying, or to pay to the family of the deceased a substantial fine for "stepping over the bones" (*ponokaLow tuLang*). Traditionally, spouses were reputed to have stayed married "until the moment they placed each other's bones" (*nyiring hosaLak tuLang*) (cf. Schiller 1997: 103). In my sample of ten *daLo'*, two were celebrated by widowers who remarried shortly afterwards. As for the wish expressed by a parent or grandparent that their children or grandchildren hold a *daLo'* for them after their death, it could formerly be accompanied by a curse on the descendants if it was not to be fulfilled (Epple n.d. 2: 8; see Zimmermann 1968: 374).

12 *DaLo'*, Buntut Sabon, 1990. Kaju' Nahan and (Bahtang) Bendu' Bendang are names of rivers in the land of the dead.

13 In this rhetorical use of the term, it is obviously more appropriate to translate *Liow* as "soul" than "spirit."

14 The aim of *pohpas* fits almost word for word Hertz's description of the Maori *tira* ceremony: "The fundamental theme is always the same: on the one hand, to repel towards the pole of mortality all impurities and evils which have penetrated and which threaten the community; on the other, to secure, strengthen, and attract to the tribe the beneficent influences which reside at the pole of life" (Hertz 1960b: 98–99). In the context of mortuary rites, as we have seen, the same prayer is uttered to "sweep out" the dead themselves.

15 The literal meaning of *Lovu' Liow*, which I translate as the "land of the dead," is "house of the dead."

16 The notion of death as a return to the land of the dead expresses a conception of life as a transitory existence in a "borrowed" world (*danum injam boLum*, literally "the river borrowed to live"), which the Uut Danum share with, and have possibly borrowed from, their Ngaju neighbours (see Schärer 1963: 61, Schiller 1997: 86).

Significant is also the fact that graveyards are usually located on the river bank a few meanders downstream from villages, so that exhumed bones are carried upriver by boat to the village to be interred in a *kodiring*. This back and forth movement of bodily remains along the river is paralleled, in Hertzian fashion, by the journey of the deceased's spirit, first downriver to the sea, then up the river of the dead, which is commonly identified as a "left tributary" of the sea (*sapang Laut komuLoy*) which "flows upstream" (*tokuLang murik*) (see Sather 1993: 80, for a similarly structured journey of the soul of the dead among the Saribas Iban). The *daLo'* celebrates the final stage of this journey and the welcome of the *Liow* at the "village of the dead," where they obtain residence further and further upriver upon performance of progressively more elaborate secondary mortuary rituals (all variants of *daLo'*). On their route to *Lovu' Liow*, as recounted in the afore-mentioned chant (*parung ngitot Liow*), the spirits of the deceased will have crossed the "hill of coffins" (*dahtah duni*) and the "hill of the liquids of decomposition" (*dahtah karam*), that is, the graveyard (cf. Hertz 1960a: 138, fn. 198). The transfer of the deceased's remains from the graveyard to the village and the family ossuary (i.e., Hertz's phase of reunion) thus coincides with a linear progression to more and more remote regions of the land of the dead (Hertz's phase of separation), thereby reflecting the inseparability of the two functional moments of the mortuary process identified by Hertz. In a different context, that of healing rituals among the Iban, Barrett (1993) and Sather (1993, 2001) have described how the journey of the Iban shaman to the otherworld of the dead in search of his patient's soul is enacted as a bidirectional movement through the space of the longhouse. Going out of the longhouse, and then re-entering it, the shaman arrives in what has become the longhouse of the dead, where he will capture the soul he is looking for. The same principle of identification-inversion between the dwellings of the living and the dead is at work in both situations. To paraphrase Sather (1993: 91), "The starting point of [the deceased's] journey thus becomes, in the inverted Otherworld of the dead, its destination." The difference, in the Uut Danum case, is that the journey of the deceased, starting at the house where he died, ends a few meters from it in the bone repository and so does not come full circle.

17 It is in this sense that Peter Metcalf talks about Berawan rites of secondary burial as a "kind of ancestor factory" (Metcalf 1982: 23). Although it would be exaggerated to describe Uut Danum secondary death rituals by this term, bone repositories certainly play a role to preserve the memory of their founders, in some cases over long periods of time. To give an example, Tokuh, a remote ancestor of the people of the Jengonoi river, is known as the founder of an old *kodiring* whose exceptionally large single post is visible in a long inhabited upstream area. According to local tradition, he had it erected for the *daLo'* of his wife whom he killed after wrongly assuming she had a lover. I was told that the *kodiring* had magical power and that people were sometimes blessed by it in the form, for instance, of gold ornaments or carnelian beads found on the ground near its pole. Another way in which secondary mortuary

rituals are instrumental in preserving the memory of some forebears is through the practice of inscribing on the *kodiring*'s walls the name(s) of its founder(s) or of some more remote forebear(s) (cf. Kampffmeyer 1991: 29, fn. 77), generally preceded by the Indonesian term *keturunan*, which indicates that the ossuary is owned by the group of these forebears' descendants.

18 Similarly, among the Ngaju, "the extended family is said to dwell together in the repository" (Schiller 1997: 104).

19 Three longhouses (Tumbang Gagu, Tumbang Konyi, Tumbang Malahoi) located in Uut Danum or Ngaju populated upriver areas of Central Kalimantan exhibit the same pattern, which Hanno Kampffmeyer considers typical (Kampffmeyer 1991: 29–31). Even where this arrangement prevails, however, the house group and the *kodiring* group are not necessarily coterminous, since, at least theoretically, rights to a bone repository can only be derived from forebears who have contributed to the cost of its construction. So it can happen that some descendants of the house founder do not have full rights of use to the communal bone repository and that they have to pay an *adat* compensation to its owners in order to be granted access. A situation of this kind is described by Douglas Miles for the longhouse of Tumbang Gagu in the upper Mentaya, whose residents were divided in two distinct although closely related descent groups (*bubuhan*) holding rights to two separate estates (Miles 1976: 68–70). Although Miles does not explicitly state so, one of these two estates probably included the house's single bone repository (see Kampffmeyer 1991: 32).

20 The basis for this assertion by Schiller is not altogether clear although she seems to be influenced by the importance of fertility symbolism in Ngaju secondary mortuary rituals, particularly as expressed in the context of placing the bones in bone repositories (Schiller 1997: 106, see Couderc 1999).

21 On the resurgence of ritual practices associated with augural hawks during the recent Dayak–Madurese conflict in Central Kalimantan, see Oesterheld, this volume.

22 Body clothing may be combined with metamorphosis, as in the following description of the augural hawk of some upper Barito people: "Belonging to the family of the eagles, he flies very high and is considered as a supernatural being, usually living in human shape in the *langit* (the highest heaven), and taking eagle form only when coming close to the earth; then his arms change into wings, his [loincloth] into a tail, and his headscarf into an eagle head" (Schwaner 1853–54, I: 230, my translation).

23 All these verbs are used transitively (e.g., *nomaLiw Lobahta* 'to change into a watersnake,' *nyoria' atang* 'to become a hawk'). *NomaLiw* and *saLuh* specifically denote physical transformation or change of form, whereas *nyoria'* and *nyoLung*

have wider semantic ranges, corresponding roughly to the Indonesian verb *jadi* and its derivatives *menjadi* and *menjadikan*. Used in this context, *nyoria'* and *nyoLung* denote less the transformation itself than its result (i.e., "to become").

24 Metamorphosis occurs at a later point in the story and is caused by the ancestor's violation of a promise made to the snake-spirit. He turns into a watersnake and becomes the river's guardian-spirit.

25 In Hardeland's Ngaju-German dictionary (1859: 122) *gaip* is defined as follows: "To leave this visible world without dying," to which Schärer (1966: 218) adds: "... and to be admitted to a spirit village (*Geisterdorf*), not to the village of the dead (*Totendorf*)." Both parts of this composite definition apply to the Uut Danum notion of *gaip/gait*. I once heard the term *gaip* used to describe the fate of a former governor of the province of Central Kalimantan whose spirit had chosen to take up residence on the Bukit Raya Mountain. Although he had died long ago, my informant maintained that he was not really dead and that his corpse could not be found in his grave. Thus *gaip* is defined by the fact of escaping death in one way or another, in which it is similar to the Malay notion of *kramat* (see Endicott 1991: 76).

26 The Ngaju use a similar procedure, Schiller (1997: 63); cf. Hertz (1960a: 55, 135, fn. 174).

27 I am adapting here an argument by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998: 482), according to whom the Amerindian dead, being "spirits defined by their disjunction from a human body," are "logically attracted to the body of animals."

28 Descriptions of similar funeral masquerades among neighbouring groups by Agerbeek (1909) and Schärer (1940–41) represent the *bukung* masks in a role as undertakers who take hold of the coffin by force and carry it to the grave. This suggests that the masked characters are the allies of the mourners in accomplishing the necessary expulsion of the dead out of the community of the living. The frightening nature spirits, for example, who represent the maximal ontological gap that the deceased could possibly cross, thus provide the *polarity* of this displacement process.

29 I pressed the matter with two elderly informants, asking if it was possible at some point to "make requests" (*bahajat*) from such metamorphosed deceased. My question elicited incomprehension, followed by laughter, from the first informant. The second, however, found it less absurd. After some hesitation, he answered that it was indeed possible, after a long time, "if the deceased had really transformed into a snake, a *Lobahta*." The propensity of recently deceased people to appear in animal form, typically a deer or another forest animal seen at the graveyard, has been noted elsewhere in Borneo (Hose and McDougall 1912, I: 81, Nieuwenhuis 1904–07, I: 105, quoted in Rousseau 1998: 111, fn. 30, Roth 1896, I: 219). In these reported instances, it results in a prohibition to eat the animal identified with the deceased but not

in spirit guardianship, which, as Béguet (2006: 208) observes, often necessitates confirmation by a dream or another extraordinary event.

30 Nieuwenhuis (1904–07, I: 103–105) presents a similar conception for the Bahau, involving two souls (one goes to the afterworld, the other metamorphoses into a zoomorphic spirit in the proximity of the grave).

31 Although endowed with an autonomous potency, these charms may in some cases mediate a relationship with the spirit of the deceased, at least for a certain time. This is illustrated by the following example. A woman felt beneath her a small stone when she was waking over the corpse of her just deceased daughter, an unmarried twenty-year old. Shaped like a miniature plaited pouch, this stone was kept by the woman as a curing charm and regularly used to treat patients, as she was a shaman. To explain the origin of the “pouch stone” (*bahtu’ soLéhpang*), the mother said that it was a gift from her deceased daughter, implying that the pouch had been transformed into stone through the daughter’s agency. She also told me that the deceased had “become” the stone (using the Indonesian verb (*men*)*jadi*), and further explained that her daughter, dead since three months back and having undergone an elaborate *nyoLat*, felt lonely and hungry in the land of the dead. If she stayed with her mother, as she had apparently decided to do, she would often eat, for the stone received food each time it was used in a curing ritual. “It seems she wanted to come back with me!” said the mother. What is interesting in the woman’s account of the ritual relationship created through the gift of a charm is how it actually distorts the logic of spirit guardianship and reverses the sense of dependence in it. Instead of benefits from the charm and its tutelary spirit, the charm offered the means to provide care and food for her deceased daughter. From this point of view, it may be argued that the woman interpreted metamorphosis according to the logic of mortuary rites, which, as we have seen, posits a temporary dependence of the dead upon their living relatives. At odds with the mortuary logic, however, is the fact that the spirit of the deceased was installed in the domestic sphere, for an indefinite period of time.

32 In connection with the same ordeal practiced among the Ngaju, Zimmermann (1968: 351) mentions that the *hantuen* were lured to the bone repository with pig flesh or another of their favourite foods. Heavenly witches were called down to possess the suspected *hantuen* who, in the event s/he really was one, would immediately metamorphose and climb up the bone repository to fetch the meat.

33 On the distinction between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism and their respective relevance in radically opposed cosmological perspectives, see Viveiros de Castro (1998: 484–485, fn. 11).

34 The same belief in the reincarnation of the deceased is described by the missionary Zimmermann as the “large cycle” (*große Kreislauf*) of the soul (i.e., the soul of the bones), in contrast to a similar but shorter process of reincarnation undergone by the *hambaruan*, the Ngaju equivalent of the *morua*, or life soul (Zimmermann

in Stöhr 1959: 198–202). According to another variant of this belief among the Uut Danum of the upper Kahayan (Epple n.d. 2: 7), there is no long cycle: the main *morua* of the deceased goes definitively to the land of the dead (as *Liow*), while six other *morua* associated with different parts of the body undergo an immediate transmutation into various plant and animal species.

35 Unlike many societies, the Uut Danum do not hold very elaborate or consistent ideas about procreation and the origins of different constituents of the person, but they usually describe the substance of common ancestry in terms of “blood” or “blood and flesh” transmitted indifferently through the male and female lines. Differing from this common view, an informant stated that bones, eyes, and brain derive from the father, and blood and flesh from the mother. This resembles the widespread Asian distinction between flesh (or blood) and bones as principles of, respectively, female and male ancestry (Bloch and Parry 1982, Bloch 1982, Huntington and Metcalf 1991, Lévi-Strauss 1969, Tsintjilonis 1999). In Borneo this conception is reported for the Ngaju (Jay 1991), with conflicting views among religious specialists about which aspect is male and which is female (Kuhnt-Saptodewo 1993: 314, Schiller 1997: 36–37), and for the Kayan (Rousseau 1990: 100). Rousseau observes that it reveals a patrilineal bias of cognatic kinship in central Borneo. A similar bias of patrilineality among the Uut Danum may be expressed by the fact that descent is often traced ultimately to male apical ancestors, in particular to house and bone repository founders. It is also expressed, as among the Lepo’ Tau Kenyah (Rousseau 1990: 100), by the avoidance of marriage between patriparallel first cousins, who are considered to be too closely related. However, this proximity is usually explained in terms of shared blood, not of shared bones. It may be mentioned here that both the Ngaju and Kayan (Rousseau 1998: 111) conceive of a bone soul, unlike the Uut Danum.

36 See Avé (1972: 193), Collins (1999: 206), Epple (n.d. 1, n.d. 3, 1927: 230), Franssen Herderscheé (1906: 385), Helbig (1942: 78), Maks (1857: 18), Riwut (1958: 370 ff.), Schärer (1966: 234), Schwaner (1853–54, II: 152). The groups sharing this myth of origin include the Melahui of the middle Melawi and some upriver Ngaju groups in Central Kalimantan.

37 Immortality is also mentioned in some narratives about transformed ancestors whose protagonists undergo metamorphosis when they reach the age of 150 or 200 years (Danandjaya 1971: 267, Hupe in Schärer 1966: 144). Interestingly, non-ancestral *Lobahta* are generally believed to originate as metamorphosed terrestrial snakes grown very old and large: cobras, which turn into good *Lobahta*, and pythons, which turn into the evil *Lobahta* *puang*, both thereupon taking up residence in the river. Very similar beliefs are held by the Ngaju (Hardeland 1859: s.v. *panganen*), the Kayan (Rousseau 1998: 94 and fn. 1), and the Bentian (Sillander, personal communication). The immortality of snakes is also invoked in the origin

myth of the north Borneo Dusun to explain the origin of human death: “When Kenharingan had made everything, he said: ‘Who is able to cast off his skin? If anyone can do so, he shall not die.’ The snake alone heard and said: ‘I can.’ And for this reason till the present day the snake does not die unless killed by man. (The Dusuns did not hear or they would also have thrown off their skins and there would have been no death.)” (Evans 1922: 176).

38 The Ngaju have similar myths about the loss of the Water of Life and immortality (Schärer 1966: 146–149).

39 Cultural heroes or apical ancestors assuming tiger form to punish human misbehaviour are reported from elsewhere in Borneo (Sellato 1983) and Western Indonesia (Barendregt 2006: 120, Wessing 2006: 53 fn. 56, 57). Other basic cultural rules such as the taboos on incest and the mockery of animals, or the obligation to share or partake of food, are sanctioned by metamorphosis (petrification) or punishments inflicted by spirit-animals, without evidence, however, that apical ancestors execute these sanctions.

40 See Kühr (1896–97, VII: 74), Mallinckrodt (1923: 539, and 1928, I: 69), Schärer (1963: 147–152, 1966: 248, 263, 882–883); and Avé (1990: 42), for a dissenting opinion.

41 See Mallinckrodt (1923: 542, 1928, I: 71), Schwaner (1853–54, II: 58–59). Petrification also occurs in one variant of the *Gaip*-Myths recorded by Schärer (1966: 239–245), whose human protagonists turn into river stones and become guardian-spirits after leaving their village and staying for a long period in the forest.

42 However, in this particular story, the apical ancestor is himself portrayed as mortal, his name being preceded by “*Liow*.” Genealogies collected by missionary Epple in the upper Kahayan region (n.d. 2, 3), in which the names of some apical ancestors are also preceded by “*Liow*,” suggest that these ancestors similarly lost their immortality when settling on earth. This was also the case with Kasiang, Lanying Suling’s sister.

43 For a detailed study of charms resulting from metamorphosis (petrification) among the Layar Iban, see Béguet (2006, chap. 6.2).

44 By comparison, many houses still contain ancestor skulls among contemporary Bentian (Sillander, personal communication, 2003, and this volume). The cult of ancestor skulls was apparently more widespread among eastern Barito groups (see, e.g., Hertz 1960a: 136, fn. 180) than among western Barito groups. However, missionary Zimmermann, writing in 1911, noted its frequency among the Ngaju (including probably the Uut Danum) of the upper Kahayan (1968: 393). The colonial administrator Kühr (1896–97, II: 76) mentions that the skull of the late Uut Danum chief Sura of Nanga Mentomoi (Ambalau river, West Kalimantan) was anointed with blood and given food offerings during festive occasions.

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CHAPTER 4

“These are Things we have not Seen. How can we Know What They are Like?”

Melanau Ancestorship as an Existential Concern

Ann Appleton

IN TRADITIONAL MELANAU FUNERAL AND mourning rituals, great attention is given to ensuring that the soul of the deceased reaches the land of the dead, for otherwise it may cause ongoing trouble for the living, particularly close relatives. Once settled in the land of the dead a soul is not permitted to leave and its interest in and significance for the living gradually wanes. In the traditional Melanau worldview, it is not ancestors but spirits who appear to exercise a double-edged moral guardianship over the living and who must be appeased. Nevertheless, the presence of the ancestors, both invoked and un-invoked, pervades Melanau everyday life and ritual practice. This chapter includes an exploration of the circumstances behind this apparent paradox, including the endeavour to reach a consensus about the meaning of the word *tipou* (which the Melanau use to refer to both grandparents *and* ancestors), and an account of Melanau eschatology.

Very few Melanau – mostly the very old – still follow the old animistic belief system. The great majority are now Muslims and a small percentage Christians, mainly Roman Catholic. Yet many of the old ideas persist across religious divides where they continue or have evolved to shape beliefs and practices in the present. In support of this, a three-pronged concept of ancestor awareness and manifestation is proposed in the Melanau present.

The ancient ancestors – where reality, myth, and cosmology are blurred – manifest as tradition bearers and are referenced to account for such things as food taboos, behaviour prohibitions, ritual procedures, and sometimes metaphysical events. In certain circumstances they also serve to demarcate divisions between past and present Melanau culture or between different religious spheres.

Recent ancestors – in which are classed the recently dead as well as those who have died within living memory – have a more immediate presence and are most notorious (though not entirely) for their disabling and destructive potential. This potential can only be mitigated through ritual action which addresses the soul of the deceased directly.

Melanau ancestors also manifest as an anonymous collectivity – the community of the dead – most notably at annual liturgical rituals, when temporal and spatial boundaries between the living and the dead are dissolved and both are incorporated into a single social order.

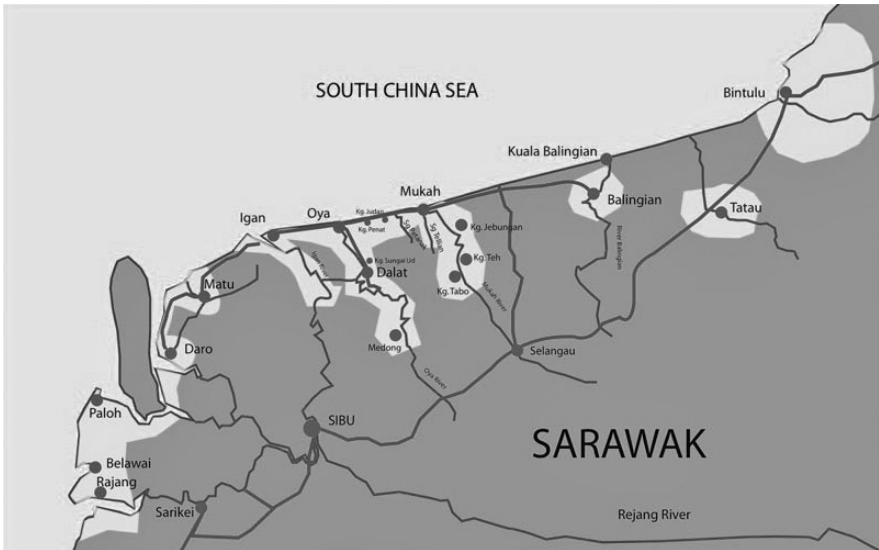
In the second part of the chapter, a longitudinal case history is presented to demonstrate how these concepts are used to frame and ritually resolve events surrounding and following on from the death of a woman in a Muslim Melanau kampong in Mukah. The ethnographic data supports the argument that knowledge about the ancestors (and other non-human beings) is anchored in concrete rather than abstract reference points and that it is accessed experientially using relational ways-of-knowing.

The final section focuses on the quality and consequences of the interactions with the ancestors, in particular the way they continue to generate community. In light of the ethnographic evidence, the chapter concludes that the term *tipou* can be understood as a “root paradigm” (Turner 1974, 1989) that provides an integrative model for the continuing generation of Melanau identity.

Background

The Melanau are historically a fishing and sago-growing people, living in the northwest coastal region of Sarawak from the Rajang delta to Bintulu and Miri (see Map 2). In 2005 the population was estimated at 127,500 (2005 Yearbook of Statistics Sarawak), equivalent to about six percent of the total population of Sarawak. Though increasing numbers have migrated to the larger towns and cities over the last fifty years, about eighty percent of the total Melanau population still live in kampong communities along the main waterways of the region, where fishing and sago-related activities continue to provide a subsistence income for many households.

Within the villages, kinship support networks remain strong and relatives tend to live in close proximity to one another, replicating the residency pattern of the former Melanau longhouses.¹ In all spheres of social interaction, relationships are constantly reaffirmed and underlined. An exploration



Map 2. Melanau populated areas (marked in light gray) and main centres (adapted from Morris 1991: facing page 1).

of possible kinship links is frequently one of the first topics of conversation when two or more Melanau meet for the first time, and is also referred to in conversation at social gatherings.

Despite widespread conversion, Melanau identity continues to take precedence over other social and religious affiliations; Melanau Christians, Muslims, and those who follow the “old religion” co-exist together (sometimes living in the same family household), in a way that is recognized as unique within Sarawak and Malaysia.² The strength of Melanau identity is most immediately evident to an outsider in the continuing use of the Melanau language, rather than *Bahasa Malaysia*, as the lingua franca of the region.³

Historical records before the beginning of the twentieth century are scarce and I have relied heavily on the work and research of Stephen Morris for historical material to compare with present day practices.⁴ Morris’s work is sanctioned in academic circles and by the Melanau as a standard text on Melanau culture in the mid-twentieth century.

Ancestors: in Pursuit of Consensus

The Melanau generic term for ancestor is *tipou* (Morris 1991, 1997). But the Melanau also use the term *tipou* for “grandparent.” Morris (1991 and 1997) as

well as Mulder and Lawrence (1930) give both meanings of *tipou* ("ancestor" and "grandparent") equal weighting in their respective Melanau-English word lists suggesting that the term had no primary meaning.⁵

According to Morris: "The term *tipou* is extended to siblings of all grandparents and their cousins, and since the term is also used for great-grandparents, it comes . . . to be used for any old person who counts as a close relative" (Morris 1953: 116).⁶ Of course the Melanau acknowledge a qualitative difference between a living grandparent and a dead ancestor. However, the usage sounds an alert that the living-dead divide in Melanau thought is different to Western notions, a point of significance which I will return to later.

The relationship between a Melanau child and a grandparent is warm and affectionate but also governed by great respect. A child may not be named after a grandparent because "the risk of disrespect . . . would be altogether too great, since the grandparent is likely to be alive and living in the same house" (Morris 1953: 116). Nor is a grandparent addressed by personal name (1953: 116). Failure to observe these restrictions could have consequences for in the Melanau world "any disrespectful act is *palei*, that is to say forbidden because it is ritually improper" and could upset the order of the universe, resulting in social and supernatural penalties (Morris 1991: 125).⁷

In practice, when referring to one's grandmother or grandfather, the terms *ma' ayeng* and *pa' ayeng* (respectively) are commonly used in the Mukah area.⁸ *Tipou tina* and *tipou tama* are also used when speaking about one's grandmothers and grandfathers, while *tipou nyat* refers to great- or great-great-grandparents (*nyat* meaning "great" in this instance). *Tipou dana* (ancient *tipou*) is a term used to refer to ancient ancestors or those at a much greater distance along the continuum of ancestorship. However, as an informant explained it, close familiarity with an ancestor rather than closeness in the genealogical chain is a more important factor in determining whether an ancestor is regarded as *tipou* or *tipou dana*. Thus an ancestor several generations removed, but whose life and exploits are still regularly recalled in family conversations, would likely be *tipou*; while an ancestor who passed away more recently but whose details are no longer socially recalled, would more likely be *tipou dana*.

Significant aspects concerning the use and meaning of the word *tipou* so far can be usefully highlighted and summarized at this point. *Tipou* may be understood as a generic term indicating genealogical connection, with a semantic range that encompasses both the living and the dead lineage

above a parent's generation and where the precise meaning is invoked and understood within the context of social relations.

Use of the term is both flexible and elastic. For example, it is sometimes used in the sense of people who have historically belonged to a particular Melanau group or village; i.e., "People in the fifteenth century may not be my forebears but they are my *tipou*."⁹ This association with a particular village, or territory, is significant because it was always possible for a stranger to join a Melanau village by invitation, unlike the Iban where a kinship link with a village member was a prerequisite (Morris 1991: 73).

When classifying relatives, the Melanau make no distinction between a mother's or a father's descent line. Since the preferred marriage in the past was with a second cousin, "the descent lines from the common grandparents would have been joined again every fourth generation" if the ideal was followed (Morris 1991: 136). The kinship categorization system described by Morris in the early 1950s still prevails; i.e., relatives up to second cousins are considered to be "close" relatives, third cousins are marginally "close," while fourth and fifth cousins fall into the category of "distant" relatives. The ambiguities and flexibilities inherent in the resulting labyrinth of relationships provide certain advantages, as Morris observed: "It is unusual for an individual to know his genealogy and its component lines of descent in sufficient depth to connect them all," but should the need arise when it would be useful to affirm relationship (e.g., connection to someone of high rank) "the appropriate *laian* (line of descent) can be recalled or invented" (Morris 1953: 69). By this means, a so-called "distant relative" can be "promoted" to the category of "close relative"; by the same means an "inconvenient relative" can be discarded (Morris 1953: 70).¹⁰

An individual's line of descent is also recognized in a system of rank categories, passed down through the father, which cut across kinship categories (Morris 1991: 134–137).¹¹ However, it had always been considered impossible to trace rank descent from an original ancestor; firstly because marriage across ranks was never uncommon despite rules to the contrary and secondly because it had always been possible to redeem rank (Morris 1991: 144, 139).

Relationship to an ancestor can also be indicated by food prohibitions. Typically, such a prohibition is explained by a story about an ancestor whose life was in danger and who was saved by an animal or plant. In gratitude he made a binding vow that he and his descendents would not eat or exploit that particular species, under penalty of supernatural retribution.¹² However the possibility has always existed that if someone was brave enough to eat

the taboo food and suffered no harm, the prohibition was considered to be nullified from that point in time (Morris 1997: 32).

“Genealogical connexion, rather than formal descent” being the norm (Morris 1953: 54), recall about *tipou dana* or ancient ancestors is generally referenced through myths and legends. Melanau legends tell of Tugau, the legendary ancestor hero of divine parentage who established an empire on the River Igan (Morris 1991: 13), and Jilag, said to be responsible for the making of the Kut canal linking the Oya and Igan rivers (Morris 1991: 39). But in the past such stories were commonly recalled to illustrate the nature of proper relationships and ordered behaviour, not as a means of claiming formal descent; i.e., the ancestors in these stories are “the ideal not the actual personality” (Kuper 1947: 188).

This emphasis on the ideological importance of apical ancestors has significant effects. It relates an ancestor to a collective group rather than an individual; it is therefore inclusive rather than exclusive. It also reduces genealogical distance by masking or bracketing out temporal boundaries. Finally, it creates a connection of “relational closeness” in the present through “practical association” (cf. Sillander 2004: 154); that is, it allows relationship to be invoked and extended for practical purposes when the occasion presents or the need arises.¹³

Genealogical Connection and the Relational Model

I use the term genealogical connection frequently in this chapter and before continuing wish to clarify that I mean something distinct from simply “descent from an ancestor.” In fact, apart from the village and family, Melanau descent groupings are only “mustered” in the context of rank categories and food prohibitions and the respective members of these groups “usually do not know one another, and never on any occasion meet as a group” (Morris 1991: 134).¹⁴

In classifying kinship relationships, the Melanau make use of two main principles. Firstly, as can be seen on the kinship chart (Figure 4.1), relatives are classified by generation; e.g., for a Melanau individual, “all the male cousins of his parents . . . up to the third degree, will be called his uncles,” even though their “biological connexions” with him may differ (Morris 1953: 65). Secondly, as outlined above, relatives are classified by categories of collateral closeness or remoteness which ignore generation differences and which may (in practice) even negate an existing biological connection (Morris 1953: 65, 1991: 129).

Like the term *tipou*, the notion of genealogical connection amongst the Melanau is “practically constituted” (cf. Sillander 2004: 154). While it is premised on the assumption of blood relationship, it is open to both ambiguity and manipulation as “individuals manoeuvre and use connections of every kind to maintain or better their security or place in society” (Morris 1991: 135). In reality, “genealogical thinking is carried on within the context of a relational approach to the generation of knowledge and substance” (Ingold 2000: 134), and does not focus solely on the criteria of descent.¹⁵ The Melanau ancestors, in this model, are not simply “procreative” but “progenerative” (2000: 142).

Ancestors, Spirits, and Elders

The ancestors are not only important as individuals who can be referred to; they are also important as an anonymous totality. They have a fundamental significance through their association with the source of the *adet*, “the principle unifying symbol of a Melanau village” (Morris 1991: 73).¹⁶ Originally, each village had its own *adet*, passed down from one generation to the next

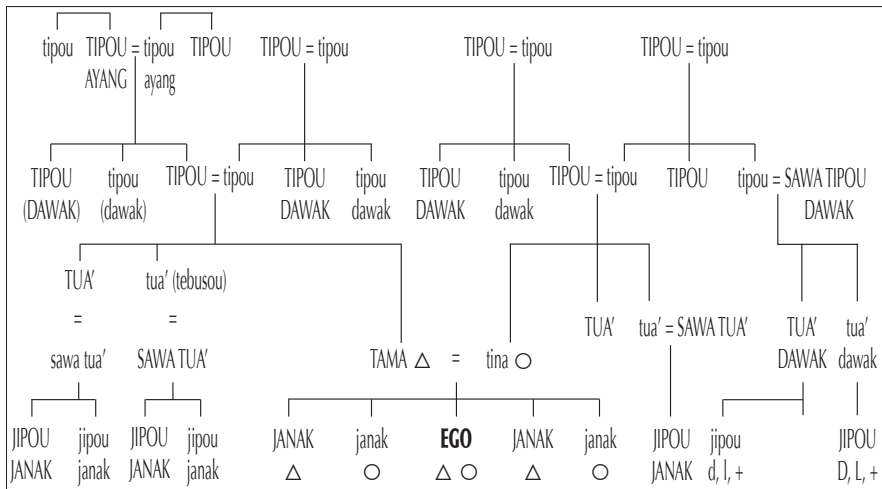


Figure 4.1. *Tipou*: terms of reference (adapted from Morris 1953: 111).

The various kinship terms are those used in Medong, where Morris did his fieldwork. Note that with the exception of the individual family and affines, kin are classified by generation [Morris 1991: 122].

Glossary (terms as used in Medong dialect): *ayang*: big; *janak*: brother/sister; *dawak*: side; *jipou*: cousin; *sawa*: spouse; *tua'*: aunt/uncle.

(1991: 82), although after the Brooke conquest in 1861 “the Melanau villages ceased to be independent political units” (1991: 302).¹⁷

Nevertheless, Morris notes that in the 1950s elderly men and women in each of the seventeen Melanau settlements on the Oya River region constantly said: “Our *adet* has come down unchanged from our forefathers” (1991: 32). This was considered to be the reason that each village had its own *adet* which differed from that of other villages.

The *adet*, or customary law, took account of the interconnectedness of all things, but above all it encoded the notion of balance and order, of things in their proper place in a world which included both natural and supernatural elements. It was a prescribed way of being-in-the-world which if disregarded, even accidentally, could result in misfortune or illness to the perpetrator or members of his/her immediate family. Following the *adet* was considered to be the best form of protection from either social or supernatural danger. Hence the imposition of a fine under the *adet* was “as much a ritual offering to a disturbed supernatural agency” as “a punishment to the offender or compensation to the injured party” (Morris 1991: 292).

The *adet* was interpreted and administered by the *a-nyat*, or village elders, nominally “an informal group of elderly men of property and rank” who were valued for their knowledge of the *adet* (Morris 1953: 52, 61).¹⁸ However, in practice, membership of the *a-nyat* was never restricted to those of high rank. A low ranking individual (even a freed slave) could become one of the *a-nyat* if he had a required skill that was highly valued (Morris 1997: 49).¹⁹ Originally this group exercised political control of a village, though this power was successively appropriated by the Brunei *Pengirans* and the Brooke regime. By the middle of the twentieth century “behaviour affecting the public life of the community had almost wholly been removed from the jurisdiction of the elders” and the head of a village was the government-appointed *Tua Kampong* (Morris 1991: 301). However his authority depended on the support of the elders and though, officially, the elders had no standing he would seldom act without consulting them.

As the acknowledged guardians of the *adet* the *a-nyat* had an important and obligatory relationship with the ancestors but the two groups could never be considered synonymous or structurally similar, in the way that Kopytoff (1971) argues is the case in sub-Saharan Africa. The Melanau *a-nyat* administered the *adet*; the ancestors were associated with the source of the *adet*. The relationship with the ancestors was a sacred contract in that

the *adet* was considered to have supernatural sanction; the relationship with the *a-nyat* was secular, albeit that it was subject to the laws of the *adet*. The *a-nyat* had a jural relationship with the people in the village; the ancestors were associated with a moral authority. The ancestors were associated with a permanent, unchanging order; the role of elder was not a permanent or inherited office. (Persons were no longer considered *a-nyat* once they were dead.) The ancestors had a "genealogical specificity" which distinguished them from elders; i.e., "An ancestor can genealogically *define* a lineage; an elder as such cannot" (Calhoun 1981: 137).

Although people declared that spirits were another order of beings altogether and neither ancestors nor the ghosts (*amou*) of human beings (Morris 1953: 95), the boundaries were often rather more ambiguous.

In the traditional worldview, the universe was made up of layers of existence, or multiple worlds, which were all inhabited, though details about those inhabitants were sketchy (Morris 1997: 7–12).²⁰ There were named beings in some of the worlds who in form resembled human beings but nevertheless were not human (1997: 7–12), nor (in the minds of the Melanau) were they associated with the ancestors. Such beings were more powerful than human beings; like the spirits they often fulfilled a guardianship role and were capable of bestowing benefits and advice, though people were reluctant to define them as spirits (1997: 15). They were equally capable of punishing someone who disregarded the correct behaviour set out in the *adet* (1997: 15–16).

Many different kinds of spirits (*ipo* or *tou*) lived in the world of human beings and were believed to be responsible for much of the illness or misfortune which beset a person, though others were known to be benevolent.²¹ However they were inherently "ambiguous beings" whose nature was unpredictable and their proximity was always considered hazardous (Morris 1997: 19).

Although people seldom stopped to consider exactly how a spirit differed from a human being, commonly held beliefs in the mid twentieth century indicate that most spirits had decidedly human characteristics. Many people believed they "lived in a ranked social system," like the Melanau themselves (Morris 1997: 19). Like human beings, they were also subject to the laws of the *adet* (Morris 1981:15). They were "both male and female; some were married to one another" (1981: 21). Moreover, they sometimes took a human form.²² A spirit could "take a liking to a human and demand a permanent and close relationship" (Morris 1997: 19). There were stories about spirits copulating with men and women and producing children who were half human and

half spirit (1997: 21), though most of these stories stress the misfortune which results from the union of different orders of beings. Tugau himself, the legendary ancestor, was said to have been half spirit (Morris 1991: 330).

In many ways spirits also fulfilled a role not unlike that of an ancestor. "The knowledge of the sago palm and how to use it, and the interpretation of bird omens" were given by the spirits in dreams (Morris 1997: 19). It was also known that spirits followed a bloodline; the spirit-helper of an *a-bayoh* was often previously associated with an ancestor (Morris 1953: 95).

Spirits possessed supernatural attributes; they could confer special gifts on a person – such as objects with healing power, or invulnerability to certain weapons (Morris 1997: 19). Supernatural ability was also reflected in their ability to shape-shift. There were stories about spirits who "were originally human beings who disappeared in the jungle" and humans who were transformed into a spirit "for some extreme act of disrespect" (Morris 1953: 143).

As is apparent, both the attributes of spirits, and the relationship between spirits, human beings, and *tipou*, were imbued with considerable ambiguity, and this resulted in a great deal of anxiety about spirits generally. Of their origins, no one was certain (Morris 1997: 17). But since their nature was known to be capricious, the relationship of spirits to human beings might at best be considered ambivalent. For this reason knowledge about the spirits "was largely practical, directed for the most part at avoiding or remedying injuries" and few people were interested in knowing or discussing the finer details (Morris 1997: 21). In fact, Morris comments on a number of occasions in his published works about the general reluctance of the Melanau to be drawn into providing explicit descriptions concerning the more metaphysical aspects of existence. Invariably, when pressed for more specific details, the subject was abruptly dismissed with a remark similar to the one that provides the title of this chapter.

Although the difference between ancestors and spirits was not always obvious, most of Morris's informants conceded some generally agreed-on distinguishing features. Ancestors are predictable; spirits are unpredictable and capricious. Ancestors never return from the land of the dead; spirits can cross the boundaries between worlds. Ancestors do not actively intervene in the affairs of the living; spirits frequently do.

Death, more than any other single event in a Melanau village, brought the relationship between human beings, ancestors, and spirits into sharp focus.

Melanau Eschatology and Traditional Death Rites

In the traditional Melanau worldview all humans were considered to be made up of four elements: *badan* (the body), *naseng* (the feelings), *bedua* (the soul, literally “double”), conceived to be a vaporous replica of the body, and *nyawa*, best described as a principle of life and commonly associated with a person’s blood (Morris 1997: 12–13, cf. Sather 2003). A person’s health and well-being required that these elements remain connected and undisturbed. Should this state of equilibrium be unsettled – and a person was constantly subject to accidents, illnesses, and attack by spirits or other non-human beings – then the *naseng* or feelings became upset first. If the feelings became too disorganized, then the *bedua* or soul would begin to split and move away from the other elements to begin its journey to the land of the dead.

Death “was recognized when breathing stopped” (Morris 1997: 105). However, the process of dying began when the soul separated from the body, which might be some time before that, especially in an older person (cf. Sather 2003: 179). During this time and in the period after death:

Spirits were attracted by the possibility of drinking blood, and ghosts, the souls of dead people who had failed to gain entry into the land of the dead and wandered between the two worlds, were lonely and came to houses in which there was illness in the hope of being able to entice the souls of living people, especially those of children, to bear them company (Morris 1997: 105).

The soul or *bedua* was the only element of a person that was “thought to survive death and go on to the land of the dead” – the *likou a-matai* (Morris 1997: 13). However, immediately after death, the soul was in a confused state and there was always the possibility that it might try to find another living body to reside in, or linger between the two worlds and become a ghost (*amou*) (Morris 1997: 112). During the funeral wake the soul of the *a-matai* (deceased person) must be reassured and persuaded to begin its journey to the land of the dead.²³ Thus every effort was made to provide whatever was necessary to ensure it reached its destination safely.

While no one could tell Morris exactly where the land of the dead was situated, there was general agreement about its topography. This was “based on the topography of the Melanau coastal district,” where “the most convenient way of traveling from one river to another was to go downstream

by boat and travel along the coast to the estuary of the river to be visited” (Morris 1997: 134). Hence, the journey was by boat, heading downriver from the village towards the sea. The land of the dead, it was thought, was situated on a river which had seven tributaries. On each one was a longhouse village and souls were directed to a particular village depending on their manner of death.²⁴ General consensus was that life in the land of the dead was similar to this one, though more pleasant; rank, wealth, and customs were preserved and it was assumed people also eventually died, though beliefs varied about what happened after that (Morris 1997: 136–137).

The deceased soul was accompanied on this journey by three spirit guides, Peng, Jingaya, and Jerunih, whose job it was to show the way and present the credentials of the deceased on arrival. The mouth of the main river was guarded by Balou Aded, an old woman who lived in a house on the river bank with one or a number of savage dogs for company, and “no human soul, whether recently dead or transformed into a ghost, was permitted to ascend the river without [her] consent” (Morris 1997: 133).

Once a soul was admitted to the land of the dead (where it would be reunited with other dead relatives), it was not permitted to re-pass the barrier to this or any other world, and it gradually lost interest in the living, except to welcome newly arrived kin (Morris 1997: 13). However, until this process was safely concluded, the soul of the deceased posed a threat to the living whose souls might be attracted or enticed to follow out of longing. Thus the ties of relationship in life continued to exert an influence after death.

While on the surface the funeral wake is concerned with ensuring the safe passage of the soul to the land of the dead, in a very real sense the activities that take place are also “defensive gestures” aimed at neutralizing the malign power of the dead over the living (cf. Shepard 2002: 214). In the acting out of these gestures a paradox is expressed: the bonds of relationship can be enabling and disabling, life-giving and soul destroying.

Burial practices differed depending on rank and status of the deceased. While primary ground burial was usual for those of lower rank, in former times secondary burial was practiced for those of high rank. The coffins of the latter group were deposited on raised platforms covered by a wooden shelter above ground and left till the body decayed (see Figure 4.2), and the ground burial of the remains took place at a later date (Morris 1997: 129).

Tall burial poles (known as *kelideng* on the Oya River and *jerunei* on the Mukah River) were used as tombs only for the rich and powerful (see Figure



Figure 4.2. Above-ground coffins in Kg. Tellian Ulu, Mukah, 2007. These are likely to date from the nineteenth century.

4.3). Often made during the lifetime of the deceased, these could be either carved or plain (Morris 1953: 146).²⁵ Human sacrifice was associated with the erection of these monuments; a live slave was buried beneath the *jerunei* as it was erected and in addition:

Young living slaves of both sexes were bound to the Jerunei, and left there to die slow deaths. Old belief . . . assumed these slaves . . . were to accompany their dead master to his new home or were offered as a sacrifice, so that he might reach his new abode in safety (Brodie 1955: 561–562).

Details about this practice were scant even in the 1950s and documentary evidence (and from my own informants) is conflicting about whether the body of the deceased was interred immediately in the *jerunei*, or whether the *jerunei* was used for the secondary burial of the bones of the deceased (see Brodie 1955, Jamuh 1949, Morris 1997). It is possible that different practices were associated with different villages. However, there is no evidence that a reincarnation belief was ever associated with Melanau *kelideng* or *jerunei* as

Nicolaisen (2003) argues is the case with the *kelireng* (burial poles) erected by the Punan Bah of the upper Rejang area.

In the period after a death social behaviour in the village, and especially of close relatives of the deceased, was restricted by taboos. Morris reports that the length of time and stringency of these restrictions varied and that “in the Oya villages no special ceremony marked the end of mourning” (Morris 1997: 133). However, people in villages on the Mukah and Balingian rivers claim to have always followed the custom whereby for forty days and nights after a death, the family of the deceased is kept company by others from the village, forty days being reckoned as the time it takes for the soul of the deceased to permanently leave the house.²⁶



Figure 4.3. *Kelideng* (Melanau burial pole) at Dalat on the Oya River.

During this period family members were believed to be vulnerable to roving spirits who came seeking blood; it was said that the blood of the newly bereaved tastes particularly sweet. A communal celebratory ritual, *keman patpulo*’ (the feast of the fortieth day), marked the end of this period and also marked the lifting of many of the taboos imposed at the time of death, though restrictions on close relatives continued for up to a year.²⁷

In the immediate weeks after a death more formal ritual activity took place. *Piup* – a major ritual associated with death rites – involved elaborate and extravagant gift-giving between the relatives of the deceased (considered a symbolic presentation to the deceased as well as to the ancestors of those attending).²⁸ *Keman keling* is a similar rite on a smaller scale, without the elaborate gift-giving; in 2001 it was still practiced in some of the upriver villages on the Mukah River. A communal meal was shared at these rituals, a plate of food and other supplies for the deceased being placed at the head of the room. Cockfighting was also associated with both these rituals, which were considered to generate status for the deceased in the afterlife as well as for the family involved (Morris 1997: 141).²⁹

If it was thought that the soul of the deceased was still lingering around in a disorientated state, an *a-bayoh* could conduct *pebayoh*, a ritual to call the soul so it could continue on to its proper destination. To reassure relatives in the wake of a death *pelatou* was commonly performed, a kind of communal séance whereby an *a-bayoh* journeys to the land of the dead and converses with the recently deceased, enquiring after their welfare, and often meeting up with the long deceased relatives of other people in the village (see Figure 4.4).

These forebears identify themselves – and are identified by those present – through the particulars of the conversation which takes place (somewhat like a one-sided telephone conversation), even if the *a-bayoh* himself cannot identify the person he is speaking to. They are neither spirits nor ghosts; they are *tipou*, in the broadest sense of the word, former members of the village community.

A reciprocal gift exchange between the living and the dead takes place on these occasions; the *a-bayoh* takes food items and cigarettes with him to pass on to the collective deceased and in return brings back healing and strengthening *pijer* (invisible flowers, stones, and fruit), as well as other gifts. *Pelatou* has a further purpose – the *a-bayoh* retrieves any souls of the living which have “followed” the deceased and on his return inserts them back into their owners via the nape of the neck or the navel. While *pelatou* provides the bereaved with reassurance that the deceased has reached the



Figure 4.4. The *a-bayoh* (shaman) and his assistant set off on *pelatou* – a journey to the land of the dead, taking along gifts for deceased relatives.

land of the dead safely and has been reunited with other dead relatives, those present are also learning about their environment: that “death is not beyond ordinary experience,” and that death “does not entail complete annihilation” (Sather 2000: 324, 325).

Hertz’s two-phase representation of death and mourning practices (1960) is clearly evident in all of the above descriptions; not only must the individual be separated from the social collectivity, but society must be re-established and reasserted.³⁰ As Jackson so excellently puts it:

In reenacting, remembering, and recounting the life of a loved one, the living succeed in simultaneously metamorphosing the dead into an ideal type – an ancestor, a paragon – and experiencing for themselves an ability to go on with life (Jackson 1998: 24).

Social Change: Schism, Continuity, and Evolution

Major social changes have taken place in the Melanau environment over the past fifty years. In the twenty-first century this process has accelerated, and

Mukah town now has the facilities, institutions, and infrastructure of any other large town or city in a modern state.

As might be expected the old traditions have not been exempt from the effects of the modernization process or indeed the social processes that have taken place in Malaysian society as a whole. It is now more than ten years since the last full-scale *piup* was performed in the Mukah District. Because of the expense involved, it is unlikely ever to be performed again. *Pesta Kaul*, the traditional annual "cleansing of the village" and once an occasion of appeasement and propitiation to the spirits, has become an occasion for secular activities such as generating income, raising civic pride, and displaying resources and talents.³¹ The religious significance has been expunged.

These days the Melanau *adet* is formally invoked by the *a-nyat* virtually only at weddings. The majority of the Melanau population is now Muslim or Christian and follows the code of ethics and moral behaviour prescribed by their religion; the Muslim Melanau have been answerable to religious law where social behaviour is concerned since the time of the Brookes.³² The 1941 codified version of the *adet* used as a reference by the Colonial administration when Morris did his fieldwork has been superseded by a State and Federal rule of law. A new draft version of the Melanau *adet* has been in existence for some years but has never been officially ratified. On the face of it, the connections to the *adet*, and the ancestors as the source of the *adet*, have been severely eroded.

Yet despite the changes that have taken place, many facets of the traditional worldview have been accommodated without conflict alongside new beliefs, and today the presence of the ancestors is still apparent in three recognizable guises.

As the source of the *adet*, the ancient ancestors continue to manifest as tradition bearers. They provide the authority for such things as food taboos, codes of behaviour (particularly concerning birth, marriage, and death), ritual procedures, and sometimes metaphysical events. In the non-Muslim villages, the *a-nyat* continue to formally officiate at weddings in decisions, negotiations, and presentations concerning bridewealth, and in seeing that correct procedure is followed.³³

On occasion the *adet* is still formally invoked in situations that threaten the integrity of village relations, in the interests of reaching an expeditious and acceptable solution. In 2001 (when I was carrying out fieldwork in Mukah), a special ceremony was carried out in Tellian with this in mind. A

mother had two young children, but she and the father had not married and were living apart. In the presence of the *Penghulu* (headman) and a group of witnesses – family and villagers – the young man acknowledged that he was indeed the father of the children, giving them the right to use his name and in the eyes of those present thereby accepting some financial liability for the children's upbringing. According to someone who had been stopped as he was bicycling past and called as an independent witness, "It saves dragging it through the courts." This ceremony was not considered in anyway unfair to either party but more in the nature of setting a seal of approval on a state of affairs. The atmosphere was therefore one of celebration amidst the feeling that a precedent already existed and had been upheld. It also indicated that the kinship network (and also the village community) were prepared to share some of the moral responsibility for every person that belonged to it (Appleton 2006: 98).

The ancient ancestors also serve to demarcate divisions between past and present Melanau culture. The few remaining *jerunei* and *kelideng* (burial poles) have become a tourist curiosity. For most Melanau they are reminders of past practices best forgotten. The anguished lament of the dying slaves survives only as part of the Melanau oral tradition. But these artifacts were always more associated with individual conceit and a display of economic power rather than regarded as objects of special reverence. It should also be noted that the Melanau ancestors are never represented by an artifact in social practice; one cannot erect a statue and say "this is my tipou" or consider it sacred. Ritual ceremonies instead focus on objects which are *associated* with the deceased.

On the other hand, apical ancestors such as Tugau have recently been given new focus in local publications of traditional stories and within the tourist industry as representatives of a *collective Melanau* past, rather than for their association with a particular village group. This muting of previously distinct territorial boundaries appears to reflect an effort to promote "Melanau culture" as a tourist product and to foster the notion of a collective Melanau identity. Similarly, the annual *Kaul* ritual festival, once observed by individual villages at different times and in separate locations of significance to each community, has now become *Pesta Kaul* – a major festival in the Sarawak calendar of events and centred on Mukah.³⁴

The forty-day period after a death continues to be marked by Melanau of all religions, as a time to provide support and protection for the bereaved by keeping them company, especially during the night.

Pelatou is still performed in the upriver villages around Mukah, as are *pebayoh* and *keman keling*, though at increasingly irregular intervals.

While conversion to Islam and Christianity has involved a rejecting of many of the old traditions because of their association with "pagan religious practices," some of these have evolved and been incorporated within a new religious context.³⁵ For example, a series of ongoing communal gatherings in the year after a death are a feature of both Muslim and Christian Melanau communities. As well as being concerned with the welfare and status of the soul of the deceased, these gatherings are a source of reaffirmation and renewal of community. Resources permitting, Muslim Melanau sacrifice a cow to feed the mourners at *keman patpulo*, the feast of the fortieth day (after death). It is said to be a way that the living can intercede on behalf of the welfare of the deceased in the afterlife.

Ancestors also continue to manifest as an anonymous collectivity. Apart from their previously mentioned authority as a basis for moral behaviour through their connection to the *adet*, religious conversion has created new opportunities for an awareness of collective ancestorship, visible at the annual liturgical rituals, *Jarah Kubur* and All Souls' Day, when Muslim and Christian Melanau communities respectively visit the cemetery to honour the dead. In the performance of these rituals, the relationships and connections of the deceased are reflected and reaffirmed in the relationships and actions of the living.

But a catalogue of examples, while providing evidence that an awareness of the ancestors still exists, reveals very little about the process by which knowledge of the ancestors and spirits is generated and transmitted. These are things that cannot be seen. By what means do they interact with the living? How is their existence known?

The previous sections have suggested that the Melanau word *tipou* (used for both grandparents and ancestors in the western sense) is primarily a term indicating genealogical kinship but that it can be extended to include a notion of territorial connection (to a particular village community), ideological relatedness, and social closeness. Further, I have proposed that the meaning of the term unfolds and is "produced" in the context of social relations (cf. Sillander 2004: 153–155). What the ancestors are like is not simply "a fetishized product of previous activity" but determined and perpetuated by "the vital activity of the living" (Jackson 1998: 27).

To understand the nature of this process requires a focus on the origins and location of knowing in the realm of lived experience – the basis of

phenomenological enquiry (Merleau-Ponty 1962). This task is taken up in the following section, which describes my experience of the interplay of events surrounding and following on from the death of a woman in a Melanau village where I lived from June 2000 till December 2001.

Social, cultural, and linguistic differences are acknowledged to occur between the various Melanau groups. Hence, the ethnographic description should not be considered representative of all Melanau communities in the area or indeed of other Melanau populations living in the wider Mukah Division. Nor does this chapter make any claim that the views presented are necessarily sanctioned by all members of a particular Melanau community.

Coming to Know the Ancestors: an Intersubjective Journey

From June 2000 to December 2001, while carrying out doctoral fieldwork, I lived in an old wooden kampong house in a Muslim Melanau village on the outskirts of Mukah town. I chose to live alone, mainly in the interests of space – work space, personal space, and private space. I think right till the day I left Mukah the villagers could not understand my decision, though they accepted it with good grace. Why anyone should want to be alone or worse, to live alone, was almost a question beyond asking. Being alone at night was especially to be avoided. The normal state of existence was to be surrounded by family and friends; the preferred mode of relating and communicating was face to face.

There were inevitable practical difficulties associated with living alone, but fortunately my choice did not appear to impact negatively on my relationship with other people in the community and before long I was incorporated into the daily round of life of the village and “adopted” by one family in particular.

One morning Siti, a woman in her early forties, called me over to visit her cousin who lived (with her husband and some of her grown children) in the house next door.³⁶ The cousin, a middle-aged woman, had been diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer some years previously, but had refused the surgery recommended by the doctors. The disease now appeared to have returned and spread; her stomach was grossly swollen. Siti had taken her to see a doctor at the hospital the day before; he had said that her stomach and lungs were full of fluid. They hoped to know more the

following week. We spent some time with the sick woman, trying to give her some encouragement and hope.

Over the next three months, despite treatment with chemotherapy, the woman deteriorated further. Now very weak, she rested at home, where most of the family had returned to be with her. When I went over to the house on the second of March, Siti told me her cousin had collapsed unconscious the night before. They all thought she was dying, but in the morning she opened her eyes, said “Where was I?”, and asked for some bread. Siti had gone into town to get her some.³⁷

The following day I went to Balingian to take part in a gathering and shared meal (*keman*) to mark the hundredth day after death for the member of a family I knew there. While I was in Balingian I received word that Siti’s cousin had passed away and would be buried that same day. Siti and the rest of the family had been with her when she died.

I was back in Mukah in time to help with preparations for the third day *keman* (communal prayers and shared meal) for the deceased woman. Two days after that, Siti and I made a trip to Sibu to buy food and supplies for the seventh day *keman*. We stayed with some more relatives in Sibu for the night and because it was within the 40 day period, everyone slept next to one another on the living room floor and the light was left on all night. One of the women explained to me that this was because the deceased is often reluctant to leave relatives and can cause disturbances and mischief around them.

Most of the night was spent talking. Siti confided that over the last few days she kept hearing the sound of the Muslim prayers recited after death in her left ear, and her cousin’s voice saying “Don’t leave me Siti,” the words the woman had spoken as she was dying.³⁸

Next day we returned to Mukah with the provisions. That night I had a fever and my sleep was broken with strange dreams. I woke once and thought I heard something on the roof – the iron was rattling and I heard knocking. I got up and walked around for a bit, but all was quiet again.

I went over to Siti’s about 10.30 the next morning to help with the food preparations for later in the day.³⁹ Several other women from the village were also there and we chatted as we sat on the kitchen floor working. I told them about the noises the night before. They said it was common to hear someone walking about on the roof after a death.

“No one has ever stayed in that house (the old kampong house I lived in) for longer than two weeks because of the noises and shaking and feeling of someone’s presence, walking around,” a woman told me.



Figure 4.5. *Jarah Kubur*. Visiting the graves of deceased relatives during *Hari Raya*. Mukah, 2007.

Another woman continued: “Thirty or forty years ago, a couple lived in that house with a ‘mongol’ daughter. The mother was Eurasian, half Melanau; the father was Asian. The father was very cruel to the daughter and beat her. One day the daughter passed away . . .”

“Suicide,” someone else added.⁴⁰

The general consensus seemed to be that the ghost of the daughter was still lingering around the house.

During the following week some additional information was forthcoming concerning events that had occurred just prior to the woman’s death. Two of her grown-up daughters who still lived at home had been helping Siti prepare food for the woman and the rest of the family. They went to the storeroom to fetch some utensils. When they opened the door, the room was full of flies. This was an unusual occurrence in itself as flies are seldom seen around the kampong houses. The appearance of the flies was even more unusual; they were grey, not black. When the young women returned to the storeroom some time later, the flies had all disappeared.

Then the day before the woman passed away, Siti's elderly mother had been coming downstairs when she felt a tap on her shoulder from behind. She turned around, but there was no one there . . .

Kemans were held again on the twentieth day, fortieth day, and hundredth day after the death of the deceased woman, attended by mostly the same group of people – relatives and fellow villagers. All followed a similar routine; communal prayers followed by a shared meal, sitting on the floor. Gossip was shared and stories told. Older women brought their grandchildren along. Life in the village continued.

Then, a little over four months after the death of her cousin, Siti was phoned by the husband of another cousin who lived in Bintulu. His wife Rabiah, who was the sister of the deceased woman, had been diagnosed with stage three breast cancer and the family was in a panic. He requested Siti's help.

Siti left immediately for Bintulu. It seemed Rabiah had discovered lumps in her breast at the time her sister was dying but had been too afraid to say or do anything about it. It was only recently, when she went "en masse" for a breast screening with the other women from her workplace that the problem was picked up. Immediate surgery was organized and radiotherapy scheduled for November. Siti returned to Mukah.

In October, Rabiah's husband phoned again to say his wife was in a bad way; she felt weak and was experiencing pins and needles in her limbs, faintness, and headaches. She was not eating or sleeping. Siti went to Bintulu again. During this visit, Rabiah confided that she often felt her dead sister's presence and was frightened that her sister was "calling" her.

Back in Mukah it was decided, after consultation within the family, to arrange for the performance of a ritual, *pigek bedua* or "calling back the soul," based on the possibility that Rabiah's soul had already begun to follow after her dead sister. A male relative, a Muslim, and experienced in this technique, was called in.⁴¹

Since an early start was required, I slept overnight at Siti's house and we left soon after 6 am, in a car borrowed from another relative. Hasnah, an adult daughter of the deceased woman, accompanied us. We went first to a kampong on the other side of town, to collect the middle-aged man who was going to perform the ritual, then drove to the Muslim cemetery and parked the car near the grave of the deceased. Siti had brought along a plastic bag and a wooly head covering (such as Muslim women wear under a *tudong* or headscarf), which had belonged to her deceased cousin. She passed these to the man.

We touched the headstones on the grave as is the custom and stood in silence for a few minutes. Then we gathered around the grave while the man prayed and recited the *Al-Fatihah* (the first *sûrah* or chapter of the Qur'an). Holding the white head covering in one hand, he bent down and gathered up some soil and stones from beside the grave, putting them in the plastic bag. In his other hand he held an iron nail which he placed on the surface of the grave.⁴² Standing again, he reached up and broke a small branch of leaves off a tree which grew beside and overshadowed the grave. This was also put into the bag, along with the hat.

We left the graveside and returned to the car, but before leaving we drove to another part of the cemetery, and spent some time at the grave of Siti's father, who had died many years previously. We drove home, dropping the man off at his village on the way. As we said goodbye, Hasnah passed him a small envelope for his services. After packaging up the bagful of articles we drove into town and put them on the bus to Bintulu. Siti phoned Rabiah's husband to let him know they would be coming and pass on the instructions given to us. Aside from the head covering, which Rabiah was to wear, the rest of the things were to be washed in water and left in the living room of the house. These actions provided a means of continuing to affirm the close relationship between the deceased and her sister but in a benign way, the relationship being anchored in concrete objects rather than at the level of soul and in a way that signaled separation of the living and the dead. Rabiah underwent the prescribed radio-therapy in November; her anxiety faded and her health began to improve.⁴³

The following *Hari Raya*, almost a year on from the death of the deceased woman, I joined the relatives seated on the ground around her grave, early on the morning of *Jarah Kubur* (see Figure 4.5). A young woman with a small child on her lap was facing the headstone and reading aloud from the Qur'an. All around us, other people were engaged in similar activity; men, women, and children, gathered around the graves in family groups – multiple images of filial piety. The spirit of *Hari Raya* was being shared and acted out in a way that made visible the connections between the living and the dead. In the ritual enactment, an interaction took place – the dead came to have an ontology of their own.⁴⁴

A Relational Way of Knowing

The ethnographic case study demonstrates how traditional concepts about the ancestors and the spirits continue to be used to frame and ritually resolve

a death in a Melanau village, including the way these concepts have evolved and been incorporated within a new religious sphere. But the study's greatest advantage lies in its ability to reveal the process of the concepts' cognition; i.e., knowledge about the ancestors is not revealed directly, but rather in the minutiae of social relationships of everyday experience.

This is a relational way of knowing. "What the ancestors are like" emerges and is negotiated, contested, and reshaped in "a field of inter-experience, interaction, and inter-locution" (Jackson 1998: 3).⁴⁵ In this scenario, the insignificant detail is as important to the whole as the momentous event. Messages are "sensed"; information is "absorbed" and "embodied." Cognition is shaped in social praxis.

The omens that occurred – the flies and the tap on the back – were not a prediction of death, but an alert that the correct order of the world was becoming disturbed and therefore a reason to be attentive and wide awake, to close ranks and focus on the events at hand. To ponder the source of the message or whether it made sense in these circumstances was a pointless exercise. A person does not need to question whether these things are true or not, or know how to tell the difference between an ancestor and a spirit, because their "truth" is grounded in experience and is advanced only in as much as it is proved to be pragmatic and able to be directed towards a practical end.

An awareness of connections between self and other is central to these examples; whatever happens to an individual can have repercussions for others, whether these are human or non-human others. Thus the relationships between persons and other forms of life have a moral quality and are interpreted in these terms; they "speak their truth" by materializing physically in the lives of persons (especially in times of crisis) as reminders about these connections.

These were not merely abstract beliefs; this was the lived reality, part of everyday experience – affirmed by exchanges of anecdotes on almost any social occasion as well as by observed custom.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the ethnographic description is that the experience of knowing has consequences. Ancestors, spirits, ghosts, and other non-human beings are not only animated within the context of social relationship, they are themselves an animating force because of this relationship. They have presence. There is a two-way response taking place in which subject and object are both actors and acted upon.

But these interactions are underpinned by a more encompassing and profound understanding about life and death; an understanding that is

generated and signaled most clearly in ritual. In consequence, the collective expressions of filial piety at *Jarah Kubur* resonate at a deeper level. In the act of dissolving the temporal and spatial boundaries between the living and the dead, they incorporate both into a single social order which is eternal; life and death are subsumed and merged in a context of deeper meaning where ultimate order prevails and ultimate authority reigns.⁴⁶ Death is no longer a doorway to oblivion, but “part of a cyclic process of renewal”; “order” is made victorious over “biology” (Bloch and Parry 1982: 15).

The Power and the Presence of the Ancestors

I want to take up the insights of the previous section and explore the notion of the relationship between Melanau and the ancestors not only as a “mutually arising” process (Jackson 1998: 7), but also as a *mutually empowering* process. For this purpose I am less interested in definitions and more interested in the quality and consequences of these interactions; in particular the way they continue to generate community.

The analysis thus far has proposed that the meaning of *tipou* unfolds and is produced in the context of social relations, that the term is characterized by polysemy but that behind the variations and complexity of meaning there is a conceptual core of genealogical connection.

It is to this last aspect I now want to turn. I suggest that the concept of *tipou* not only has a conceptual core of genealogical connection but that its use is also associated with what might be described as a “drive” for genealogical connection that is primarily a drive for integration. For example, two or more Melanau meeting for the first time will invariably explore and attempt to establish genealogical connection early in the proceedings for no obvious self-interest or advantage other than the apparent satisfaction it brings.

An occasion when a literal meaning of *tipou* did not make sense in terms of desired outcome also bothered me. An informant finished explaining to me that a person must have surviving offspring to qualify as *tipou*. Hence, “Siblings of my grandparents who do not have children are not specifically my *tipou*.” He paused, then added: “But it’s possible they might be.” An immediate exploration of various possibilities followed but ultimately he was unable to resolve the issue by this means, although he remained certain that the possibility existed. This experience suggested that *tipou* had a higher order of meaning that was not immediately obvious.

More convincing evidence for this came some time later when I sent an early draft of this chapter to a Melanau acquaintance for comment. He was affirming of my material but it was another comment that proved more illuminating. "I can see now how confusing this [notion of *tipou*] must be to you. . . . *Tipou* is about the soul of the Melanau."

It was a moment when I realized that the meaning of *tipou* did not consist in an understanding of words but an understanding of world and that the primary meaning of *tipou* did not inhere in either grandparent *or* ancestor but in the specificities and consequences of their relationship in the context of a recognizably familiar Melanau world.

This makes relations with the ancestors more than a matter of genealogical kinship; it becomes "a matter of relations between persons, whole and actual persons" living in the *same* world (Trawick 1992: 135). Ultimately, the concept of *tipou* is irreducible, not only integrating the variations in meaning manifested in the existential domain, but transcending them.

Hence my proposition that *tipou* be conceived as a "root metaphor" or "cultural root paradigm" in the sense used by Turner (1974, 1985).

Root paradigms are "certain consciously recognized (though not consciously grasped) cultural models in the heads of the main actors. . . . These have reference not only to the current state of social relationships existing or developing between actors, but also to the cultural goals, means, ideas, outlook, currents of thought, patterns of belief, and so on, which enter into those relationships, interpret them, and incline them to alliance or divisiveness. . . . Paradigms of this fundamental sort reach down to irreducible life stances of individuals, passing beneath conscious prehension to a fiduciary hold on what they sense to be axiomatic values, matters literally of life and death" (Turner 1974: 64).

In this sense, *tipou* is a model of *eternal* community that is "cognitively delimited, emotionally loaded, and ethically impelled" (Turner 1985:167), a model for realizing a world where the sacred and mundane, the living and the dead, the immanent and the transcendent, the past and the present are incorporated into the context of a seamless and continuous "now."⁴⁷

But *only* ritual has the power to hold these oppositions in balance and create this reality. Such a model of continuity is unsustainable and especially vulnerable in the mundane experience of a close-knit Melanau village. Human sentiment and individual aspirations create unending conflicts of interest which challenge kinship closeness. People die; discontinuity is

inherent in our biological condition. The integrity of a world posed in these terms is constantly under threat.

Events of this kind, and particularly death, are experienced as social crises, precipitating social action to redress the threat to social continuity and equilibrium. This is a recurring theme in the ethnographic description, not only in the experiences and ritual practices relating to death, but also in the rules and regulations of the *adet*. The world must be constantly “re-gathered” and reasserted to ensure its continuity. The hermeneutic nature of this process is applicable as much to the relationship with the ancestors as it is to the relationship between *tipou* as root paradigm and the constituent practices, interactions, and network of metaphors through which it is manifested, reworked, and reinvested with energy.

As a root paradigm, *tipou*, in all its myriad of associations, encapsulates and expresses the irresolvable paradox of being in the Melanau world and the continuing effort to reassert the integrity of that world. Even the spirits, as a continuing component part of the Melanau world, are integrated within this model, resolving the apparent paradox whereby they (rather than the ancestors) exercise a moral guardianship. The integrating power of the concept of *tipou* and its ability to contribute to the continuity and strength of Melanau identity in the present day testifies to the continuing presence and relevance of the ancestors as, within the social relationships of Melanau everyday experience, they continue to connive in their own destiny.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 These longhouses are described by Morris as “massive wooden fortresses built on stilts, often thirty feet above ground level” (1991: 42) and for that reason they are

sometimes referred to as "tall houses." They were known simply as *lebu*' (house) followed by an identifier; e.g., *Lebu' Uja'* in Medong was located at the confluence of the Oya River and Sungai Uja' ("sungai" meaning tributary stream). Most of the Melanau had moved out of these dwellings by the early twentieth century. The last longhouse in Medong was abandoned when the Japanese invaded in 1942 (Morris 1991: 79).

2 For example, in 1949, 113 out of 175 households in the village of Medong (64 per cent) followed the old animist religion (Morris 1991: 109, 119). In 2007, only about 15 families in Medong still adhered to these beliefs. A few families or individuals who keep to the old religion can be found in upriver Melanau villages throughout the region and are often referred to locally as the "free thinkers."

3 Morris writes: "By 1960 about three-quarters of the coastal Melanau were Muslim converts, but all spoke Melanau as their first language, and did not consider themselves to be Malay, although the Malay-speaking population of Sarawak did on occasion refer to them as such" (1991: 6). The situation regarding the Melanau/Malay identification label and the use of the Melanau language remains unchanged, 50 years later.

4 Although the bulk of Morris's material was collected in the period 1948–1950, recollections of elderly informants as well as existing written records confirmed that many of the social and cultural forms in existence then had little changed since 1860.

5 Morris reports that he sometimes found it difficult to ascertain precise dates for historical events or persons because his informants used *tipou* to refer to both grandparents *and* ancestors (Morris 1991: 327). One of my informants suggested that the context in which the term was used in social practice would normally locate the meaning more precisely.

6 The word *tipou* is not extended to a spouse's equivalents.

7 Morris considered that the concept of *palei* had no precise English counterpart; "fundamentally it is a religious notion, applicable only to actions that carry some kind of supernatural, sacred penalty" (1953: 67).

8 I have also heard middle-aged men talk affectionately about *nenek*, when referring to a grandmother who died many years previously. *Nenek* = grandmother (Malay).

9 *Forebear(s)* has no precise Melanau counterpart; it translates as *tipou*. My informant was speaking in English.

10 Sillander records that "notions of relationship" are similarly manipulated for advantage by the Bentian (Sillander 2004: 157).

11 The population of a village was made up of about ten per cent of aristocrats, eighty per cent of middle ranks and ten per cent of slaves (Morris 1981: 11). Behav-

iour between members of different ranks was regulated by the *adet* or customary law (ibid.). Slavery was abolished in Sarawak in 1888, but continued “under discouragement for several more decades” (Morris 1991: 187).

12 In a variation, the ancestor may have *turned into* an animal. For example, “A man who outlived his contemporaries . . . sat in the sun on a mat until his body hairs turned into feathers. Before flying away as a pigeon, he made his descendents vow never to eat pigeon” (Morris 1997: 32).

13 Sillander (2004: 154) refers to the importance of “‘practical’ as opposed to ‘genealogical’ relatedness” in notions of Bentian kinship and the significance of “practical association” for relational closeness. “Bentian use the idiom of kinship . . . not only for genealogical kin. . . . Terms of address and reference are ‘extended’ to include affines as well as friends and neighbours” (ibid.). Sillander names this idiom “practical kinship” (ibid.). Melanau, however, use the “genealogical idiom,” strictly speaking, for blood relatives only, reckoned bilaterally through the father and mother; e.g., “affinal relatives are set apart terminologically from blood relatives” (Morris 1991: 122). Ego-centred kinship groups, “summoned *ad hoc* for particular tasks” (usually from those who live close-by), “accept the invitation . . . as a legitimate obligation on kinship” based on blood relationship (Morris 1991: 132). Historically, such groups in Melanau society were always temporary (ibid.).

14 The criterion of descent suffers from serious disadvantages in the context of a bilateral kinship system such as the Melanau use; i.e., an individual’s kinship network will be comprised of many lines of descent, leading to conflicts of interest from membership of multiple descent groups (Morris 1991: 133).

15 Melanau notions of genealogical connection could be said to conform more to the “rhizome model” of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), with its “dense and tangled cluster of interlaced threads or filaments, any point in which can be connected to any other” (Ingold 2000: 140), than the standard genealogical “tree” model.

16 Morris suggests the *adet* is derived from both “experience” and “beliefs about the nature of the universe” (1997: 4).

17 The people of Medong told Morris that Tugau was the source of their *adet* and that his descendants had founded the village of Medong. “What mattered to them was that Tugau was the source of their *adet*” and this was more important to them than “the details of the foundation of the village” (Morris 1991: 75).

18 “No single elder was superior to the others, though he might have special knowledge that fitted him for particular tasks. . . . Leadership was not formalized into permanent offices, and there was no single political chief who ruled a village as of right” (Morris 1981: 11). Not only had there never existed any Melanau word for headman (Morris 1953: 83), the Melanau ideal model encouraged submissiveness when young, soft-spokenness and humility – “the training of the Melanau was spe-

cifically designed not to produce a leader of this kind" (Morris 1953: 85). Military leaders who showed a talent for the role appear to have been raised when the need arose (Morris 1953: 84).

19 A local informant suggested that slaves could never become *tipou* (he could not recall such a situation), though the implications of rank may have discouraged this association.

20 While some knowledgeable elders told Morris the world consisted of fifteen layers, most people thought in terms of only three, i.e., a middle world where humans lived, an upper world and a lower world (Morris 1997: 10). In reality, "The pictures of the universe differed with every informant who was able to tell stories. . . . It was clear that their memories were often fragmentary, and when memory failed there were signs of invention" (1997: 8). It was said that in mythological times people could visit these other worlds but, with the exception of the Melanau shaman (*a-bayoh*), the ability had been lost (Morris 1997: 11). Rice was said to have been introduced to human beings after such a visit.

21 The words *tou* or *ipo* were commonly used to refer to spirits and in the minds of some people these words referred to two categories of spirits with different characteristics. However, Morris was aware that even in the 1950s the difference between *tou* and *ipo* was very uncertain (Morris 1997: 18). In 2007 I had the opportunity to check this matter out with an elderly and now retired *a-bayoh* (shaman) of high repute. He assured me there was no difference between them and I am happy for him to have the last word. I have not gone into detail about other aspects of the spirits because I am primarily interested in their connection to the ancestors for the purpose of this chapter. However, Morris (1997) has written extensively about the subject, including the different categories of spirit and their attributes and the categorization and use of carved spirit images (*belum* or *dakan*) in Melanau healing rituals.

22 According to one of Clayre's informants, in the olden days, spirits "lived in the world alongside humans just like other people, and often they were quite friendly," though in the present day they could no longer be seen (told by Ramli Bandung of Kg. Kekan to Iain Clayre, in Clayre 1972: 50).

23 The term *a-muhud* is also used for a deceased person.

24 For example, "Women who die in [childbirth] . . . are a source of ill luck and go to a special tributary of the river of death where they live apart from people who have died a natural death" (Morris 1953: 121).

25 The practice of secondary burial seems to have "died out with conversion to Islam and also through an implicit ruling under the Brooke [sic]" (Aseng 1998: 3), though eyewitness accounts indicate that isolated cases continued to occur into the mid twentieth century (see Morris 1997: 129, Newington 1961: 106–107). The

erection of *jerunei* and *kelideng* and the practices associated with them ceased much earlier, possibly by the end of the eighteenth century.

26 Sarawak Malays also observe restrictions for 40 days after a death and it is possible this practice was introduced via Islamization.

27 Recent information from an elderly informant in Kg. Tellian suggests that historically it may have been the practice in the Mukah and Balingian villages to mark the lifting of restrictions on close relatives by a communal visit to the grave of the deceased, a year on from his/her death.

28 "*Piup* was also celebrated at a secondary burial when the bones . . . were interred, or . . . placed in a jar to be left in a *kelideng*" (Morris 1997: 141).

29 In 2001 an elderly informant told me that both *piup* and *keman keling* are concerned with "lifting the spirits up." The phrase has multiple referents in this context: to ensure that the status of the deceased is securely established and upheld in the afterlife, "to feed the spirits who are attracted by the death" (Morris 1997: 141), and to metaphorically "lift the spirits" of the living.

30 Whether deceased infants or children could become ancestors (since they would not become grandparents) was not mentioned by Morris but when I was in Mukah the death of a child was not accorded the same lengthy ritual process as an adult, consistent with Hertz's interpretation that "since society has not yet given anything of itself to the child, it is not affected by its disappearance and remains indifferent" (Hertz 1960: 84). Persons such as children or young adults who die before their appointed lifespan and without progeny also challenge the ideal moral order of the world because they threaten the continuity of the group.

31 For a number of years during the transition, the spiritual significance of *Kaul* was actively endorsed by institutionalized religion. Buyun (2000: 3) writes: "When I was a student in Mukah, the Catholic priest held the Sunday MASS at the same place where the Kaul was held today . . . After MASS we joined the normal Pesta Kaul." This would have been in the early 1960s.

32 Prior to Sarawak becoming part of Malaysia, all Muslims in Sarawak came under the jurisdiction of the *Undang Undang Malayu* (the customary law of the Kuching Muslims), in matters concerning, for example, marriage, inheritance, slander, and religious offences; i.e., those concerns not covered by the Laws of Sarawak (Morris 1953: 90).

33 In the early 1950s, Morris observed: "It is the *sorong brian* (bridewealth) which, in the words of the Melanau themselves, is the 'work of the old and the great'" (Morris 1953: 131). The most important part of the bridewealth is *penyakap*, a sword, spearhead, or kris according to the rank and village, and "frequently called the *adat*" (ibid.: 133).

34 In 2007, Melanau communities stretching from Daro to Brunei displayed their talents, products, and resources in individual pavilions as well as communal activities, an impressive public demonstration of the strength and pride of collective Melanau identity. Many of the pavilions featured old black and white photographs and items of interest and significance relating to the past life of a particular village community. Some Melanau villages continue to celebrate their own *Kaul* in addition to taking part in *Pesta Kaul*.

35 "Remembering is social" (Jackson 1998: 129). The particular things or places that are remembered or considered significant are a function of social relationships in the present. By this process some things, activities, or places are abandoned, like the former burial practices, or even acquire negative connotations, like the *jerunei*. Others have new associations incorporated into them; e.g., remembering the deceased at All Souls and *Jarah Kubur*. Taking historical process into account had always been sanctioned and reflected in social practice. Morris relates how an old man said to him, in reference to the *adet*: "The word must not be missing: the appearance may be" (Morris 1991: 288).

36 Although personal names and some other identifying details have been changed, the events are related in the sequence they unfolded.

37 When a very ill person asks for a specific food like this, especially something special, it is considered a significant sign that they are dying. In fact, it seems to be expected that these things will be asked for and every effort is made to comply with these requests.

38 "The dying person's last words are cherished and spoken about for a long time afterwards" (Morris 1953: 147).

39 The relatives of the deceased, who frequently lived nearby in the same kampong, are responsible for the food and preparation for these *kemans* which can involve considerable time, effort, and expense. As families tended to be large, there was seldom a shortage of assistance, including financial. Siti often took me with her to assist at these functions; I was regarded as a kind of "surrogate" member of the family by her relatives.

40 There was always a good deal of exaggeration in this sort of gossip and I was aware of this.

41 On asking whether the ability to perform this particular ritual was an inborn, inherent talent or learned, I was told it was a skill that is passed down in a family. When persons with the skill think they may be nearing the end of their life, they teach it to someone else.

42 The nail (iron) acts as a barrier between the person doing the ritual and the other party involved; a kind of protection so that nothing harmful is transferred

or lingers between them. This was especially important when one of the persons involved was young or still active; old persons were less vulnerable.

43 As of December 2007, Rabiah remains in good health. The family of the deceased continue to commemorate her passing once a year with a gathering and shared meal, attended by a small group of relatives and other people from the village.

44 Ontology can be glossed here as “existence” or “agency” in the world, signaled by the interaction.

45 This is consistent with the existentialist phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty; i.e., being is always being-in-the-world which includes the understanding that we are always being-in-the-world-with-others and that the world is the structure of meaningful relationships within which we live our lives. Relationship is therefore a fundamental element of our experience as persons (Heidegger 1962, Merleau-Ponty 1968).

46 Rappaport argues that participation in public liturgical orders “constitutes a public acceptance of a public order, regardless of the private state of belief. . . . It is the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance, and not the invisible, ambiguous, private sentiment, which is socially and morally binding” (Rappaport 1999: 122).

47 This is the lived reality of rituals like *piup*, *keman keling*, and *pelatou*. The reciprocal gift-giving, the preparation of food for the deceased, the conversations in *pelatou* are experiences Melanau share with close kin, especially after a period of absence.

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CHAPTER 5

Iban *Petara* as Transformed Ancestors

Véronique Béguet

THIS CHAPTER PROPOSES THAT THE Iban *petara*, known in the literature mostly as “gods” (see, e.g., Jensen 1974), are in fact ancestors. Furthermore, it argues that the *petara* are transformed ancestors taking animal and bird form, thus pointing to a connection between the human and animal realms. The chapter adopts an approach to Iban ancestorship inspired by recent theory of animism (e.g., Bird-David 1999, Clammer, Poirier, and Schwimmer 2004a, Descola 2005, Ingold 2000). This approach to animism was already developed in my dissertation (Béguet 2006), which presents a more extensive analysis of the subject.

The Iban, like most Borneo peoples (see Sellato 2002: 1), have no term for “ancestor” and refer to deceased forebears collectively as *aki’ ini’* (grandparents) or *orang dulu* (people of the past). The overwhelming majority of the deceased go to Sebayan (“the land of the dead”) and are separated from the living through various funeral rites (Uchibori 1978). After a period of time, the deceased eventually disappear and become dew that nourishes plants, thus “transubstantiating” into rice (Sather 1980a, Uchibori 1978) and *pua’*, the sacred blankets, the production of which involves the absorption of dew (Drake 1991). Among the Iban, funeral rites hold a central place, and the literature insists on their function of separating the living from the dead, as stressed by Hertz (1960). A small minority, however, remains near the living and will, in some cases, be propitiated through special rites in exchange for their support in human undertakings. The dead who support humans are said “to become *petara*” (*nyadi petara*). There is thus a clear link between the minority of dead who become ancestors and the *petara*.

In the Iban ethnography, the terms *petara* and *antu* usually mean, respectively, “gods” or “divinities of the pantheon,” and “malevolent, aggressive beings.” Both terms, however, also have a more general meaning in their daily usage by villagers. The universe is inhabited by invisible entities of various origins – *antu* in the generic sense, including benevolent and malevolent beings. When they are malevolent, they may be referred to as *antu* in a narrow sense. Among the malevolent beings (*antu* in this narrow sense), there are several subgroups, including the succubi, the incubi, the “forest spirits,” and the most terrifying of all, the *antu gerasi*, in short, all beings that are more or less dangerous and live near humans.

When the *antu* (in the generic sense) are benevolent, it is more polite to call them *petara*. Villagers use the expression *jako’ siru’* for such usage (*jako’* means “word, language” and *siru’* “attentive, sensitive”). Out of respect, the term *petara* is applied to any entity that seems kindly disposed to humans. I will use the expression “the great *petara*” to distinguish those that the literature calls “gods” from other benevolent entities. The great *petara*, the mythical heroes, the dead, and any other beings of human or non-human origin that “support” humans constitute sub-groups within the larger category of benevolent beings, which itself is a category of invisible entities.

Petara is thus a term of address that encompasses specific categories of benevolent invisible entities. The *petara* have earned this name mainly by supporting human undertakings in prestige-generating spheres of life including: rice cultivation and acquisition of prestige objects, the most valuable of which are Chinese jars; manufacture of *pua’* blankets (woven by women); warfare and headhunting; mastery of ritual chants; administration of customary law and oratory; and, more recently, success at school and subsequent well-paid employment in the civil service and business sectors (see Figure 5.1).

Through this support, it is said that the *petara* “sustain the life of us humans” (*ngidup kitai mensia*). *Ngidup* is the verbal form of the root *idup*, which is translated by “life, alive, living, give life, support” by Richards (1988: 112). This support is absolutely necessary for any human to succeed. Just as often, the villagers say that the “human forebears” (*aki’ ini*) “sustain us humans,” thus highlighting the close bond that unites the two groups.

There are, however, differences among the great *petara*, the mythical heroes, the dead who have become *petara*, and other benevolent *antu* of human or non-human origin. The difference is one in degree rather than in kind, especially in degrees of power. The great *petara* have the most power.



Figure 5.1. Chinese jar and *pua'* blanket. Two forms of prestige objects which can be acquired through support by the great *petara*, who include deceased relatives.

Next come the mythical heroes, and last the dead and the *antu* of living beings. This hierarchy is largely a function of how remote the *petara* are from the supplicant, of how rarely they provide assistance, and of how much impact they can have. It is much more common to be assisted by a deceased individual than by a mythical hero or by one of the great *petara*.

On the other hand, exceptional individuals are normally supported by powerful entities such as a mythical hero or the great *nabau*. Such people, however, are so rare that one must explore an entire region to find a handful of them. In one village which I visited, only one person still alive could boast of such assistance and this person was an important, albeit not exceptional, *lemambang* who was known region-wide. Other *lemambang*, whose fame was more local, were supported by less famous beings. This hierarchy is also visible in the rituals. The community invokes the great *petara* collectively whereas individuals summon their personal *petara* individually either in small rituals of their own or during great rituals (for instance, by adding the name of their personal *petara* in a prayer). Under these conditions, it is difficult to discriminate between different categories of benevolent beings, for example to tell “divinities” apart from ancestors. I suggest that this lack of clear distinction is created by the metamorphosis of the dead, which is a still ongoing process.

This line of argument is opened up by Sather and Wadley who prefer to speak of the *petara* as cosmic ancestors, instead of as gods, or divinities. Sather states that the *petara* are not primeval creators.

Like the ancestors, the principal gods are not primordial beings, but rather historical figures with remembered pedigrees. Thus, the gods appear together, as ancestors, with human beings in Iban genealogies (Sather 1994b: 4).

Continuing this line of argument, I argue that the process that creates such ancestorship is, par excellence, the metamorphosis of invisible entities and, particularly, their transformation into animals. In this, I differ from Sellato (2002: 14) who suggests that ancestorship is created through ritual means. The Iban actually perform a propitiatory rite to ancestors, but only as a required *response* to a proven transformation that has already occurred.

Do the relationships with the benevolent dead form an instance of “ancestor worship”? Wadley states so, and downplays the role of animism among the Iban on that basis, referring to the fact that, at the core of their religion, they

... worship their ancestors (*aki' ini*). For example, through prayers (*sampi*) people invoke the distant ancestors (*betara*) from the graves and tombs. People give offerings to their ancestors and call upon them to help them produce abundant rice crops and become wealthy (see Richards 1988: 321 for a typical prayer) (Wadley 1999: 598–599).

These practices do not, in my view, represent a “cult of the ancestors” but rather, the core of Iban animism, which involves the capacity to establish proper relationships with immanent invisible beings of human and non-human origins. The dreams and augury, as much as the rituals, are all means of creating and maintaining such relationships, personally or collectively.

I agree with Sather and Wadley that the Iban *petara* have the attributes of “ancestors” in the sense of representing “historical figures with remembered pedigrees.” Going further, I suggest that the *petara* are transformed ancestors and that the transformation connects humans with the animal and bird worlds. In addition, they are ancestors in the sense, given by Ingold (2000: 140–142), of representing various entities who nurture humans. The term includes all of the dead who, at least temporarily, have escaped the cycle of separation and Western linear time in order to help humans. All are *petara*, in the broad sense of benevolent entities, a term that encompasses the so-called gods of the pantheon, the mythical heroes (*Orang Panggau*), and the dead who support the living. All of them “support humankind” (*ngidup mensia*) by ensuring the success of human undertakings and they are propitiated accordingly through rituals and prayers.

My views on this subject fall within a number of new approaches to the animism concept, all of which stress the key importance of metamorphosis and the links among the human, animal, plant, and mineral worlds (see, e.g., Clammer et al. 2004a, Howell 1996, Ingold 2000). In these approaches, the boundaries of these worlds are dissolving, as is the fundamental nature/culture dichotomy. These new approaches also diverge from religious anthropology and its Judeo-Christian heritage, which presumes the transcendence and superiority of a creator God over nature (Callicott and Ames 1989: 3–6). Instead, they emphasize the immanence of invisible entities that inhabit the same world as humans and frequently interact with them. The way these entities relate to humans is a central issue in their analysis. Among these approaches, I favor Ingold’s dwelling perspective and his reconceptualization of ancestry as a set of relationships with multiple beings who act within a sphere of nurture (Ingold 2000). I shall present briefly the conceptual tools on animism, the

crucial notion of metamorphosis, and my argument, which uses the literature on *petara* on the one hand, and my own data, on the other. I collected the data in 1996 during my ten-month doctoral fieldwork in a mid-Layar village of the Saribas area, in the Second Division of Sarawak, following a previous five-month stay.¹ As the Layar is next to the river Paku, I refer the reader to the presentation of the region made by Clifford Sather in this volume.

Conceptual Tools on Animism

A Cosmocentric Approach to Animism

Since the 1990s, what has been called ontological anthropology (Clammer et al. 2004b) has revisited the animism concept through cosmocentric approaches, that is, by using the cosmos – including invisible entities – as the principal unit of analysis, instead of the human individual (homocentric approach) or society (sociocentric approach). Beyond its different factions, this current of thought emphasizes the following basic principles of animism: the crucial importance of metamorphosis; the conaturality (i.e., common nature) of humans, animals, plants, and minerals; and the extension of sociality and personhood to sentient entities of different origins (human and non-human) who are immanent in this world. Some of these characteristics are present in non-animist religions, too, but there is a special connection between them in animism reflecting the logic of “animic ontologies” (Clammer et al. 2004a, Descola 2005, Ingold 2000, Viveiros de Castro 1998).

The metamorphosis of a being (living or dead, human or non-human) into a different one (from an invisible entity into an animal, for instance, or from a living being into a spiritual being) is attested in hunter-gatherer societies in different parts of the world (Descola 2005). Among the Australian Aborigines, it is made possible by a permeability and flexibility of forms that enables humans and ancestors to partake of a common substance (Poirier 2004: 66, 2005: 11). In Amazonia, it is at the heart of what Viveiros de Castro (1998: 469) labeled perspectivism, i.e., “the conception . . . according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, humans and non-human, which apprehend reality from different points of view.” Such points of view are related to the perceptions and abilities of the bodies (human, animal, etc.) acquired through metamorphoses. Among the Ojibwa, metamorphosis is the basis for relations between humans and other-than-human people (Hallowell 1960: 39).

Different authors have taken various approaches to emphasize different aspects of this common nature of living things, this common substance shared with invisible entities, and this extension of personhood to non-humans. For some, the sharing of common characteristics, generally a body and an inner vital part, unites all species (Hallowell 1960: 42, Ingold 2004). Others stress attributes like intentionality or reflexive consciousness (Descola 1996: 64–65, Fausto 2004, Howell 1996: 130–134). According to Poirier (2004: 62–65), ancestors metamorphosed and thereby came to impregnate the entire Australian landscape with their essence. These parts of the landscape play an active role in the process of conceiving a new child, thus linking humans and ancestors with a common substance.

All authors recognize the key role, in animism, of sociality among human beings and also between human and non-human beings, whether based on reciprocity or predation. This characteristic is central to Ingold's view that beings are constituted in relation to their environment (2000). Bird-David (1999) applies Strathern's term "dividual," which designates an individual composed of relationships, to integrate the importance of sociality into the conception of personhood. Among the Kukatja, a network of social relations is part of personhood (Poirier 2004: 69). Among the Cree of Subarctic Canada, reciprocity between humans, as well as between humans and non-humans, predominates (Scott 2004, Tanner 2004: 17). Descola (1992: 116) views the Amazonian world as a huge homeostasis in which human relationships are analogous to those that prevail between humans and animals based on reciprocity or predation.

A Relational Approach to Ancestrality

Inspired by ecology researchers who reject neo-Darwinism, the ecological psychology of James Gibson, and the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Tim Ingold (1996) has developed the perspective of the "dwelling in the world" specifically with respect to hunter-gatherers, by contrasting it with the constructivist perspective.

Apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view of the world but of taking up a view in it (Ingold 1996: 121).

According to Ingold, the organism-person (both biological and cultural) is constituted through its engagement with its environment, a process called "progeneration." In animist ontologies, the world – the environment

– is composed of humans and non-humans with whom individuals have relationships.

This vast web of relationships includes relations with ancestors. Ingold (2000: 132–151) offers a relational definition of ancestrality that contrasts with the genealogical definition. The latter is exemplified by the image of a family tree and focuses on the succession of generations in which personhood is “handed down” as an endowment from predecessors. The relational model resembles a “rhizome”:

This is to be envisaged as a dense and tangled cluster of interlaced threads or filaments, any point in which can be connected to any other. . . . [The rhizome] is a progeneration, a continually ravelling and unravelling relational manifold (Ingold 2000: 140).

Ingold gives examples of ancestors who can be humans who lived in the past; spirit inhabitants of the landscape; mythic other-than-human characters; or original creator beings. People are grown through such multiple relationships in the process of life itself. Ingold contrasts progeneration with procreation and the concomitant process of the succession of generations.

By progeneration, in contrast, I refer to the continual unfolding of an entire field of relationships within which different beings emerge with their particular forms, capacities and dispositions (Ingold 2000: 142).

Persons should be understood not as procreated entities, connected to one another along lines of genealogical connection or *relatedness*, but rather as centres of progenerative activity variously positioned within an all-encompassing field of *relationships* (Ingold 2000: 144).

Ancestors, as defined above, are meaningful by their presence and activities, rather than by the passing down of the rudiments of being *per se*. Instead of acting out inborn characteristics, people develop and grow through multiple relationships with these beings during their lifetimes. As a whole, these relationships form “a sphere of nurture” in which humans “are grown” (Ingold 2000: 144). Such a sphere of nurture also exists among the Iban. Before going any further, it is important to note that this web of relationships is a central component of animism.

Animism as a Field of Relationships with Invisible Entities

The current revisiting of animism entails a redefinition of the term, which diverges from the old one associated with nineteenth-century evolutionism

(Clammer 2004: 85–86, Descola 1996: 66). New definitions, however, vary from one author to the next. Descola (1996: 66) and Viveiros de Castro (1998: 473) maintain a distinction between society and nature and argue that animism is the projection of social relations onto nature or a socialization of the natural environment. As with Shintô, it refers to a “complex of beliefs and, more importantly, practices encapsulating an understanding of human–cosmos relationships” (Clammer 2004: 89).

The term *pengarap* introduces us to Iban animism. It is the substantive form of the root *arap*, which is translated as “faith, confidence” by Richard (1988) and as “faith, trust” by Sutlive and Sutlive (1994). With a touch of humor, an Iban woman contrasted the *pengarap* with the attitude to the gods of other religions. The Christians look for their “God” and find him in their Bible. The God of Islam is far away and must be summoned by loud-speakers. But the Iban *antu* are close, *semak* (“close, adjacent”). They see (*meda*) and hear (*nginga*) humans. They can punish inappropriate behavior or grant requests for charms or help. They express their own wishes, notably requests for food, and issue warnings. In return, humans must watch for their manifestations (dreams and omens mainly), drive away aggressive entities, and foster close bonds with the benevolent entities through rituals and offerings, all of this being defined by customary law. A close bond translates concretely into an abundance of charms, bountiful harvests, and many manifestations of good omens. Those qualifications of the Iban *pengarap* entail a definition of it as being about the creation and maintenance of appropriate relations with the many invisible entities of varying origins that inhabit the universe. Among these relationships, I wish to call special attention to those that “sustain human life,” that translate into help within prestige-generating spheres.

Animism, as defined above, does not imply that everything in nature is animated. This point is a subject of some controversy. For instance, the fact that not all natural species have a “spirit” leads Metcalf (1982: 47) to conclude that the Berawan of Borneo are not animists. However, this also holds true for societies recognized as animist by the above-mentioned authors throughout Amazonia, North America, and Southeast Asia. The Achuar recognize that some animals and plants have human attributes, and Descola (1996: 63–64) distinguishes them from entities that do not “communicate with anyone, for want of having their own soul” – what we call nature – entities such as fish, mosses, grasses and ferns, and rivers. Most authors do not think in terms of such a distinction and simply state that

certain beings have personhood only when they reveal themselves as such, although all have the potential to become people (Bird-David 1999: 74, Howell 1996: 135–136). The key test is experience and they “are not animists in the sense that they dogmatically attribute their living souls to inanimate objects such as stones” (Hallowell 1960: 24–25). On this point, the Iban do not differ from the peoples discussed by these authors. Any living being may become an invisible entity, although some seem more so inclined.

This potential is, in principle, attributed to any living thing. Nevertheless, each people seems to favor certain categories, be it the forest (for instance for the Nayaka of southern India), or characteristics of the desert in the case of Australian Aborigines, or animals in other cases. The human–animal relationships are central to many ethnographies, especially those about the Aboriginal peoples of Canada’s Subarctic region or Amazonia. Descola (1996) and Viveiros De Castro (1998: 472), who focus on hunting, even regard it as the core of animism, that is, as its most fundamental relationship. In the Iban case, the human relationships with plants (rice) and precious jars are also fundamental. Animals too are important, not so much as hunted prey, but as transformed ancestors who support prestigious human activities in return for offerings.

The Relationship between Humanity and Animality

Revisiting animism entails reconsidering the relationships between humans and animals. This point is important since I am interested in how some of the dead transform themselves into animals. In some hunter-gatherer societies, animals are ancestors and must therefore be “despiritualized” or “desubjectivated” by cooking or by shamanistic treatment (Fausto 2004, Scott 2004, Tanner 2004, Viveiros de Castro 1998). As we will see, there are some differences in the treatment of animals among the Iban.

Wazir-Jahan Begum Karim (1981) discusses the relationships of humans to animals and plants among the Ma’ Betisék of Peninsular Malaysia. The relationships are tied to different ritual practices and contexts that are expressed through different mythological corpuses. Humans are allowed to consume animals and plants because the latter have been cursed (*tulah*) by the Ma’ Betisék’s ancestors. On the other hand, humans are forbidden (*kemali*) to destroy or kill animals or plants, these being reincarnations of human ancestors who may, in reprisal, inflict illnesses and natural catastrophes. In practice, *kemali*’ and *tulah* apply to different contexts in terms of activities and rituals, so there is no contradiction. Humans are hierarchically superior

to plants and animals in *tulah* situations and hierarchically inferior in *kemali*' situations. Karim concludes that animals and plants symbolize nature in *tulah* situations and culture in *kemali*' situations. Referring to Lévi-Strauss's dichotomy, she affirms that plants and animals lie within the domain of raw food, i.e., nature. Humans transform this food and eat it, thus performing a cultural act. Her argument is interesting in that it puts the focus on two distinct dimensions of reality. But, in my opinion, it is not so much a matter of culture and nature, but of animals and plants as living beings or as invisible entities, each being linked to the other through metamorphosis. The attention paid to metamorphosis/transformation opens a way to go beyond Lévi-Strauss's dichotomy on nature and culture.

Metamorphosis as a Transition between Two Basic Dimensions of Reality among the Iban

The power to metamorphose is associated with the *antu*, the invisible beings, who as among the Ojibwa (Hallowell 1960) master this ability to a greater degree than do humans.² The *antu* can transform themselves or provoke the metamorphosis of living beings. Thus:

One of the most fundamental notions of the Iban is expressed in the phrase *bali' nyadi*. *Bali'* means: to change in form, and *nyadi*: to become. Together, these words refer to the capacity of all things, substantial and insubstantial, animate and inanimate to change in form and become something else: to metamorphose; so that a stone may become a spirit as readily as a spirit may become a stone (Freeman 1975: 286–287).

The nuance between the two terms lies in how temporary or lasting the metamorphosis/transformation is. Becoming something else supposes a quite enduring state as changes in form can be temporary. I shall argue that such processes of metamorphosis constitute passageways between two dimensions of reality.

The Iban universe is inhabited by two broad groups of beings. The first are living beings who share conaturality, i.e., common characteristics, "a common nature." All living things (*utai idup*) – humans, plants, animals, and, I would add, certain objects such as jars – share some features, such as a life force (*semengat*) and a "body" (*tuboh*) (Freeman 1992: 35, Sather 1993: 285). These features are the basis for their common nature. The *semengat* can detach itself from the *tuboh*. This forms the basis of local theories on

dreams, illness, and death. Dreams are the wanderings of the *semengat* in the universe; a *semengat* captured by some malevolent entity results in illness; the separation is definite with death.

The second kind of beings, invisible entities (*antu*) are ontologically different: they have no *semengat* or *tuboh*; in short they are not living beings. Saying that they do not have a *tuboh* does not mean that they are immaterial. They do have what we would call a bodily appearance, but this is never referred as *tuboh* – at least I never heard such a qualification – which is, like *semengat*, a characteristic of living beings. Despite those differences, *antu* share a common substance with living beings because of an infinite number of metamorphoses in both directions: living beings become invisible entities as readily as *antu* transform into living beings. More than this, invisible entities and living beings are not mutually exclusive categories: any living being can at the same time be *antu* and vice versa. In emphasizing this, I am suggesting a way to solve the ambiguity in the literature on the respective statuses of the *semengat* and *antu*.

One such ambiguity is underscored by Metcalf's comment on Hose's description of the Kayan ghost-soul (a kind of invisible entity) and vital principle. According to Hose, the Kayan vaguely distinguish between two souls:

On the one hand, the ghost-soul, which in a live man wanders afar, in dreams and abstractions; and, on the other, the vital principle, which possesses the 'conatus in suo esse perseverandi', which is Life. As long as the latter remains in the body, the ghost-soul may return to it; but, when death is complete, the vital principle departs and the ghost-soul with it. This interpretation is borne out by the use of the word *urip*, which in common speech means 'to be alive', but may also be applied to a person recently dead, as if to mark the speaker's sense of the continuance of the personality, in spite of the death of the body (Hose 1926: 206, quoted in Metcalf 1982: 55).

Metcalf considers that Hose's statement is incoherent: if the vital force persists after death and if the "ghost-soul" is just wandering, then death is not clearly differentiated from dreaming. Indeed, among the Iban, dreams and death are very close as far as the *semengat* is concerned: in both cases, it is detached from the "body." However, death is signalled through the fate of other components of the person, that is, through the end of breath (*seput*) and of another principle of existence (*nyawa*).³

The ambiguity between the *semengat* and the *antu* culminates in the literature on non-human living beings. The similarities between human and non-human *semengat* are clearly attested (Freeman 1992: 153–154). Some authors insist on the equivalence between the *semengat* and the *antu* of rice (Freeman 1992: 153, 188, Jensen 1974: 153, Uchibori 1978: 42–43, fn. 5), while others distinguish them as meaning respectively the rice's vital force and an "unseen guardian presence that looks after the padi and avenges its injury or abuse" (Sather 1977b: 158, fn. 8).

From my perspective too, *semengat* and *antu* are very different ontologically as, respectively, vital force and invisible entity, but they are linked together by metamorphosis. In my thesis (Béguet 2006), I argue that, while separated, the *semengat* has the potential to metamorphose into an *antu* (invisible entity). This occurs at death when the living being becomes an invisible entity (through the transformation of the vital force) and a corpse (through the concomitant transformation of the body). The literature on Borneo tends to consider death as *the* passageway between the two worlds (of the living and the invisible entities). In my view, death is just one occurrence, although a particularly dramatic, permanent and radical instance, of a more global process: the transformation of a living being into an *antu*. This view is supported by the fact that the same process can also occur during life. Roth (1980, I: 232) quotes Grant, whom a man asked for refuge because he was threatened by a neighbor who had dreamt he had stabbed his father-in-law. Uchibori mentions a similar case involving a living shaman:

Shaman Jimbat's *semengat* was thought to have become an evil spirit of the kind called *antu gerasi*, and to hunt the *semengat* of other people while he was sleeping. The death of an infant several years ago in a neighbouring longhouse was actually thought to have been a result of this hunting of his *semengat*. After Jimbat's death, two women in his longhouse had dreams in which they encountered him. One of the dreams, which was dreamt on the night before the ritual of the 'separation' (*serara' bungai*) . . . , was particularly ominous. In this dream the dreamer was in a forest not far from the longhouse, where she came across the shaman who came down from the opposite direction. The shaman was accompanied by two dogs and had a spear in his left hand. She was afraid at his sudden appearance and asked what he was doing there. Jimbat answered he was hunting. Having heard this, the dreamer was really scared and shouted, 'Don't, Uncle, don't attack me! We are all kin'.

This dream was taken by many as demonstrating that the deceased shaman's *semengat* was haunting the area to hunt the living's *semengat* (Uchibori 1978: 36–37).

Sather (1978: 321, 2001: 40, 73–74) also notes that some *antu* that hunt young children are often helped in this activity by other people who live in these children's apartments. Their allies are typically old women, who, “in virtually all instances, no longer fulfill a woman's normal sexual and reproductive role due to old age” (Sather 1978: 321). The author adds that

Human beings cannot directly know the state of a person's soul, its ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’. It can only be surmised through an individual's outward actions or by the consequences of his behaviour in the world of experience. With regard to the human *buyu*, the woman whose soul acts as a malevolent ally of the *buyu rumah* spirit is believed to be unaware of its action because the attacks that give evidence of its malignant state occur, not in the directly perceivable physical world, but in the realm of the souls ordinarily imperceptible to herself and others. Only the ultimate consequences of its actions – miscarriage and infant death – are directly seen. Thus the woman who acts as a human *buyu* is thought to be unconscious of the inner betrayal of her soul that unknowingly causes her to harm others (Sather 1978a: 322).

Iban villagers do not link a bad *semengat* with the owner's personality, which is seen to derive from the liver (*ati*). However, as Sather (1978: 322) rightly notes, “The notion of a bad soul carries with it a taint. In this case, the elderly woman suspected of being a *buyu* is often thought to harbour envy, or her ill-fate may additionally be attributed to an inherited defect, a neglect of omens or omission of ritual observance.”

The owner of the *semengat*, however, is held responsible for keeping it firmly attached to the “body.” A *bad semengat* is a wandering *semengat*.

Indeed, some *semengat* are said to develop a habit of constant wandering (*selalu mindah* or *segau-segau*). For the Iban, such souls are said to have ‘turned bad’ (*jadi jai*) (cf. Sather 1978: 321–322). A person with a ‘bad soul’ (*semengat jai*) is considered unlucky and, during the soul's frequent absences, is likely to suffer long, recurrent bouts of illness, loss of appetite, or experience mental confusion, weakness of limbs, and lassitude. Worse still, if the soul continues to wander, it is likely to become lost (*tesat*), or,

worse yet, be captured (*tangkap*) by the *antu*. In addition, it may, of its own accord, become 'wild' (*liar*), assuming not only the appearance, but also the behaviour of an 'untamed animal' (*jelu liar*). In this state, called *lepas*, the soul is said to become timid, bolting away at the approach of other human souls (Sather 2001: 68).

In my view, all these statements indicate the crucial importance of metamorphosis. A wandering *semengat* can potentially metamorphose into an *antu* (malevolent or benevolent). In such cases, it is no longer referred to as *semengat*, but as *petara* if it is benevolent or *antu* otherwise. In such situations, although the owner might not have done everything to keep the *semengat* attached, he is not held responsible for the invisible entity's actions. Crucial here is the distinction *jinak/liar*, which is translated as *domesticated/wild* (Richard 1988, Sutlive and Sutlive 1994). But these terms refer to the state of the *semengat*: attached, or wandering. All rituals for living beings (e.g., for people, rice, or jars) serve to ensure that the *semengat* is strongly associated with the body (see Figure 5.2). For the purpose of this chapter, I will concentrate on the other side of the coin: the wandering *semengat*.

Although the literature reports only occurrences leading to aggressive *antu*, the same phenomenon may give rise to benevolent *antu*, i.e., *petara*. I know at least one instance of a living human who appeared as a *petara* to someone in a dream and acted as a benevolent entity, giving him support to become a wealthy man. This man, whom I will call Aki' (grandfather), is knowledgeable in oral history and customary law. He took part in warrior raids in his youth and, in particular, has succeeded "materially" by having plentiful rice harvests and acquiring a precious jar and other valuable goods. He attributes this success to the *antu* (invisible entity) of a man still alive, whom I will call Apai Bujang, whom he met in a dream long ago. In the dream, many people were gathered on a longhouse veranda. Apai Bujang singled out Aki' and told him: "You will be *raja* (rich and powerful); you will be seated in the upper part of the gallery (*dudok ke atas nuan*; i.e., in the section of the house reserved for important men)."

This dream contains a very typical encounter with an *antu* who "blesses" (*sumpah*) the dreamer. *Sumpah* refers to an utterance that creates what is said, whether favorable or not, for example, an oath, blessing, or curse. When favorable, a *sumpah antu* is the greatest help an individual can receive. In

the example above, the striking element is that the *antu* is associated with a living human who, at least temporarily and independently of his conscious will, is metamorphosed (*bebali*). The dream carries many implications, but only one matters here: a living being may metamorphose into an invisible being while still alive. The ethnographic literature does mention cases of aggressive *antu* associated with living humans, although the authors do not in these cases refer to the principle of metamorphosis/transformation. In addition to the example of Uchibori presented above, Roth (1980, I: 232) cites Grant who recounts how a Melanau asked for refuge after having stabbed a man in a dream and becoming threatened with reprisals by the man's son-in-law should the man die of his wounds.

There are thus, in my view, two dimensions of the same reality (living beings versus invisible entities), ontologically distinct as much as intimately associated. Iban villagers never confuse those two dimensions. They reserve very different practices for them. For any significant living being (humans, rice, precious jars), these practices are guided by three concerns: to secure the life force to the "body" to ensure the living being's vitality and health; to protect the *semengat* from attack by invisible entities; and to shield the living being against human sorcery. When confronted with an invisible entity, the primary concern is to act appropriately with this social being: drive it away if it is aggressive or establish a social relationship by giving food to it when it is benevolent. The Iban address both dimensions at the same time, in rice rituals for instance when they secure the rice as a living being and propitiate it as an invisible entity. The two dimensions of existence differ, yet they co-exist and people are constantly on the lookout for such transitions between them. There are continuous passages in the form of varieties of metamorphosis and transformation.

Thus, multiple metamorphoses interlink the two basic dimensions of being in the Iban universe: living beings and invisible entities. In a previous work (Béguet 2006), I have investigated Iban animism in terms of different types of metamorphosis/transformation, each type involving passageways in either direction between living beings and invisible entities. One of these passageways is the metamorphosis, more or less temporary or permanent, of the *semengat* into an *antu* as mentioned above. In this chapter, I will confine myself to a single passageway, in the reverse sense: the transformation of the dead into animals and birds (see also Béguet 2007).



Figure 5.2. *Nanchang padi*. Layar woman binding a clump of ripened paddy during a harvest ritual in order to secure the rice *semengat* to it.

Animal and Bird Ancestrality through Transformation

Here, I will discuss a principal form of Iban ancestrality, one which results from the transformation of the dead into animals and birds. We should remember, however, that other forms exist, such as that which results from the Iban dead turning into dew that nourishes rice, which allows the Iban to say that “rice is our ancestor” (*padi aki’ ini’ kami*) (Sather 1980a: 93).

The dead that I am concerned with here are not these dead who go to the Sebayán afterworld to ultimately turn into dew, however, but a minority of the dead who remain close to the living as aggressive or benevolent entities. As helpers, they will be called *tua’*, a term translated in the literature as “familiar spirits.” When the spirits are helping shamans or bards, they are called *yang*. The most famous *tua’* or *yang* are the mythical hero Keling or Kumang (Masing 1997, I: 22), the mythical dragon-snake (*nabau*), and the wildcat (*remaung*) (Harrisson and Sandin 1966: 76–77, Richards 1972: 79, 81, Sandin 1977: 189, fn. 10, Sather 1988: 178). Thus, the benevolent dead are subsumed within the group of beings who are in a helping relationship with humans.

Any invisible entity in this type of relationship is regarded as a *petara*. The benevolent dead are said to “become *petara*” (*nyadi petara*) or the *petara* of the people whom they help (*petara kitai, petara diri’ empu*). In some respects, they are not treated like the ordinary dead. Uchibori (1984, 1978: Chapter 8) reports on the “enshrinement” of the dead, a process which is concerned with the special status afforded to some individual deceased persons. He notes three types of enshrinement, which have fallen into disuse: perching the casket on a platform reserved for renowned warriors; burial in a location outside the cemetery at a man’s request before his death; and rearrangement *a posteriori* of a normal burial place after the appearance of an animal associated with the deceased. Although the Iban distinguish between these three types, Uchibori (1984: 17) notes that they tend to stress the similarities among them. All three differ from ordinary practice and signify that the dead have “become *petara*” (*nyadi petara*). Their special treatment is mainly due to their presence in the world of the living and their more frequent interactions with the living. Uchibori (1984: 17) reports that they are considered to be “still alive” (*agi idup*), as may be seen in the practice of cancelling the period of mourning if an event confirms that the deceased has become a “divinity.” These deceased are also not celebrated during the *gawai antu*, the rite that finally installs the other dead in the land of Sebayán.

My interest is in the dead who have become *petara*, especially those who correspond to Uchibori's third type, which, in my opinion, does not involve "the appearance of an animal associated with the deceased," but indeed the transformation of the deceased into an animal. Before addressing this point, I need to show that the *petara* can clearly be considered ancestors.

The *Petara* as Ancestors

In this section, I will briefly review the ethnographic literature with reference to three characteristics of the Iban *petara*: they have become invisible following separations; they do not live in another world (i.e., like the Christian heaven) even though they occupy separate territories; and they are listed in Iban genealogies.

The ethnographic literature systematically differentiates the divinities into different categories, beginning with the most powerful ones of all, the great *petara* – the seven children of Raja Jembu and Endu Kumang Baku Pelimpang (Sandin 1994, Sather 1994b: 37). The two most important children are Singalang Burong, who is associated with war and omens, and his brother, Simpulang Gana, who has custody of the land and whose favor is curried by farmers. All of these "gods" live in the sky (*langit*) or underground, unlike living beings and invisible beings who inhabit the earth (*dunya tu*).

Just as benevolent to humans are the mythical heroes who inhabit the Panggau or Gelong rivers. It is still unclear where these rivers are, the location being thought to be of "this world" but at the edge of the sky (Masing 1997, I: 22, Sather 1994b: 31). The most famous heroes are Keling and his companions – or, depending on the version, his brother Laja. They are respectively married to Kumang and Lulong, two sisters, the first one being the loveliest and most accomplished of all women (Sather 1994b: 34 ff.). The mythical heroes trace their lineage back to Nabau, a mythical dragon-snake who was the grandfather of Keling and Kumang (Richards 1988: 249).

The world is also home to the dead (*menoa Sebayan*). They are collectively called *orang Sebayan* ("people of Sebayan") or *antu Sebayan* ("invisible entity of Sebayan"). They reach this land of the dead by crossing the Mandai River, which is a mythical place and a real location as well (see Sather, this volume).

In Iban myths, humans and invisible entities originally lived in the same world, intermarrying and relating to each other as equals. The humans emerged victorious in a conflict with the *antu*. Wishing to avenge their defeat, the latter invited everyone to a feast, during which they got the humans drunk and

rubbed their eyes with coal, thus making themselves completely invisible to them (Barrett 1993: 243, Roth 1980, I: 225–226). Ever since, a thin transparent film has separated one group from the other, similar to the translucent skin of a fruit, either an eggplant or the *lemayong* palm, depending on the version (Masing 1997, I: 21, Sather 2001: 111–115, Uchibori 1978: 298–299, my own data). This myth clearly establishes visibility/invisibility as the major axis of human–*antu* relationships, as noted by Sather (1993a, 1993b) and Barrett (1993).

In the myths, a similar process of separation involves humans, the great *petara*, and the mythical heroes.

At the very beginning of genealogical time, the first human ancestors lived together, as one, with the gods (*petara*) and mythic spirit-heroes (*Orang Panggau*). Later the gods and heroes departed from this common origin-place, which is identified in most Iban traditions with the Kapuas region of western Kalimantan. Each migrated to a separate region of the cosmos, leaving humankind (*mensia*), the spirits (*antu*), and the natural species of plants and animals in possession of ‘this world’ (*dunya tu*), that is to say, of the visible world of everyday waking experience. . . . Finally, although they are now separated, and live apart in different regions of the cosmos, the gods and spirit-heroes continue to take an active interest in the living Iban (Sather 1994b: 4–5).

Thus, humans and invisible entities dwell not in different universes, but in different regions or territories (*menoa*)⁴ of the same universe. Indeed, before leaving, the invisible entities told the humans how to get to their new territories so that they could visit and ask for assistance. The journeys to these territories form the core of the long ritual invocations recited by the bards (Masing 1997, I: 114).

Although occupying different territories, *petara* and humans lead similar lives. The great *petara*, the mythical heroes, the dead, and even some *antu* live in longhouses, grow rice, abide by customary law (*adat*), practice augury, and have genealogies. They all use charms and benefit from the assistance of familiar spirits (Sandin 1967: 251, Sather 1994b: 73). In fact, say the Iban, some of the invisible entities, the great *petara*, taught humans this way of life through the intermediary of culture heroes.⁵

Besides this relationship, there are additional connections between invisible entities and humans, which suggest that they are indeed ancestors, at least the ones who are great *petara* and mythical heroes. Among them are the many genealogical ties that link different invisible entities to humans (see

also Sather, this volume). An example may be found in a genealogy collected by Sandin (1994: 315, Genealogy XIX) that begins with a man, Beji, who engendered an *antu*, Antu Berembayan Bulu. This *antu* had two sons, Telichu and Telichai. During a hunting expedition, Telichu transformed himself before his brother's eyes into an *antu gerasi*, the giant hunter who eagerly seeks out the *semengat* of those humans who ignore dreams and omens. He then told his brother that he would become invisible, while remaining available for dream encounters, and that he would teach him how to protect himself from this type of aggressor (Sather 1994b: 35, Sandin 1994: 89). He thereby founded the lineage of the *antu gerasi* who, though generally dangerous to humans, occasionally give charms to shamans or bards and become their "familiar spirits" (Gomes 1911: 199, Sandin 1994: 147, fn. 27). Simpurai, one of the mythical heroes (*Orang Panggau*) and Keling's companion, is actually descended from the *antu gerasi* Telichu; hence his volatile temperament, which caused a conflict between humans and mythical heroes, thus forcing the two groups to part company (Sather 1994b: 32–34).

Telichai, Telichu's brother, is considered to be an ancestor of humans too. According to Saribas genealogies, he had many children as a result of his union with Bunsu Kamba, including Si Gundi who was the father of Keling, the most famous of all mythical heroes (Sather 1994b: 35). Telichai was also the grandfather of a human, Serapoh, who learned the rules of *petara* mourning and funeral rites and taught them to humans. Cultural ancestors like Serapoh played a preponderant role in receiving and teaching knowledge and were humans who are part of the genealogies. However, they do not appear to contemporary Iban and no specific rituals are held for them. They belong to a long-gone past, unlike the benevolent invisible entities.

Sandin (1994) and Sather (1994a), in particular, provide many examples of this intertwining of human and invisible entity lineages and its consequences for the Iban social universe and Iban ritual. Here, I primarily wish to call attention to the fact that kinship ties are said to join the two groups. Kinship ties also extend to what Westerners call natural phenomena. Fire engendered a human, Simpang Impang. A star of the Pleiades married a human. The moon and the stars helped teach rice-growing practices to Sera Gunting.⁶

Benevolent Invisible Entities as Transformed Ancestors

Among all of the *antu* who inhabit the Iban universe, I will next discuss those who help (*nolong*) humans. In other words, I have selected a group

of beings of the Iban cultural environment who are collectively referred to as *petara*, in the general sense of benevolent entities. When the *petara* give assistance in any prestige-generating activity, they are said to “support the life” (*ngidup*) of humans. Similarly, the Iban repeatedly state that “our grandparents (i.e., the dead ones) provide us with support” (*aki’ ini’ kitai ngidup kitai*). Indeed, the dead who help the living are said to “become *petara*” (*nyadi petara*). Some transform themselves into animals. Out of all the data I gathered, I have extracted a few examples, mostly recent ones, which concern deceased individuals who remained near the living. These deceased can prove to be either harmful or benevolent. Here, I will not present any examples of aggression by such individuals, although such examples are as numerous as are those of support.

1. When termites (*sampok*) pile up earth over a burial place, the deceased is believed to be watching over his or her descendants and acting as a *tua’* (“familiar spirit”). Until 1978, the village of Rumah Manah shared a cemetery with two adjacent villages. It then opened its own cemetery, in which there are two termite mounds (for a picture of such mounds, see Figure 2.5 on



Figure 5.3. *Ngintu burong*. Propitiatory rite performed following the apparition of a snake representing an auspicious omen. People surmised that the snake might be the manifestation of the spirit of a dead relative. The ritual served to initiate a relationship with the deceased as a helping spirit.

p. 140). One of them has been growing for some years on a woman's grave. Her son and daughter-in-law would not say much on this subject, but their success had been considerable and the villagers attribute it to the dead woman. Another termite mound started to emerge in 1993 but on a man's grave this time. As with the other mound, the deceased's heirs have seen a marked improvement (*ensur*) in their conditions of life. The husband's salary has considerably increased over a few years.

2. In Rumah Manah, a couple and one of their parents were buried outside the cemetery. The first to be buried was the husband, a man whose powers were so exceptional that he could foretell the day of his death. He asked that he be buried near his pepper garden rather than in the cemetery (for a reason unknown to me). The villagers complied. His family followed his example.

3. Some dead benefactors may turn into animals, especially into a snake, which will make one or more appearances. In these cases, the animal acts as an omen (*burong*) in the same way as would an augural bird. For example, a couple living in town found a python curled up in a cauldron. After consultation with an omen specialist, the snake was declared a good omen. The couple then performed a propitiatory rite, to which they invited their relatives and important figures from the bazaar (see Figure 5.3). During the ritual, one question bothered the audience: did anyone in the household have a dream? The negative answer was responded to with perplexity. A few days later, a small group of villagers again debated the question and categorically denied that such an omen could occur without a dream that reveals the identity of the invisible entity (*enda' patut nadai mimpi*). If the immediate family did not have such a dream, the search for one should continue among the extended family. Subsequently, it was found out that the wife's brother had dreamed about his great-grandmother. A precedent did, in fact, exist in the wife's lineage. The grandfather of her grandmother had become a snake. Thus, it became plausible to attribute this metamorphosis to her great-grandmother, although an additional unambiguous dream was needed to confirm the hypothesis.

4. A few years ago, a snake appeared in the *bilik* of an old widow. Her son-in-law carried the animal to the jungle because it is forbidden in such cases to kill it. A rite was organized to propitiate this good omen, which led to the woman acquiring a gong that year. A neighbor's dream identified the snake as the woman's dead husband. This metamorphosis seemed perfectly

plausible to the villagers, who insisted that all members of the man's lineage had turned into snakes, albeit different species (*peturun sida nyadi ular magang*). In fact, only some members had become snakes, but apparently enough to be called a lineage, a succession of generations (*peturun*).

5. A woman dreamed that both her parents had turned into pythons upon their deaths. A python did often visit her home, thus enabling her to acquire valuable goods: a jar, gold jewels, and tableware. Harvests also became more abundant thereafter. In addition, the dead parents were said to have assisted in increasing the rice crops of another of their children.

6. As a child, a man now living in town disliked school and decided to drop out in the sixth grade. His namesake ancestor visited him in a dream, gave him a charm (*tandok pelandok*, the tusk of a mouse deer), and encouraged him to stay at school. The child obeyed. Later, he also acquired a charm to improve oratorical skills (*ubat berandau*), in the form of a turtle (*kura*). One day while carrying it in a bag, he was followed by a mouse deer (*pelandok*), which kept pace and fled only when chased away with stones but repeatedly returned. A dream clarified that his namesake ancestor had metamorphosed into a mouse deer. The informant added that the mouse deer is a good friend of *kura*' turtles (cf. stories of such friendship presented by Roth 1980, I: 311, 342 ff. and Sutlive 1992: 108–109). Thanks to this support, the child is today a right-hand man of the Deputy Prime Minister of Sarawak.

7. Long ago, a man named Ungging dreamed that some pieces of chopped firewood represented a python into which his grandfather had been transformed, and that his grandfather was going to support him during a warrior raid.⁷ Ungging died young and single but renowned for his bravery. Many villagers remember the metamorphosis of Ungging's grandfather and it seems that he was not satisfied with just helping his grandson. One villager claims that the entire village used to hold propitiatory rites for this *antu* who could heal sickness, but who reportedly later became malevolent (*nyadi buyu*) and is now gone. The villager attributes this about-face to lack of ritualistic consideration by the villagers, on the one hand, and to intensive logging of the jungle, which reduces the snake's habitat, on the other.

The above ethnographic examples in varying ways exhibit two of the three types of enshrinement mentioned by Uchibori that I referred to above. For instance, example 2 illustrates the possibility that a man, who has received a special burial, can become a *petara*. An important man asked to

be buried outside the cemetery and his descendants clearly expected him to become a *petara* (although he does not seem to have become one yet). This phenomenon thus inversely mirrors the case of people dying early or through ill-fated deaths (i.e., in accidents, in giving birth) (see Sather, this volume). Just as such people are likelier to turn into predatory entities, so are exceptionally successful living beings likelier to turn into *petara*. Nevertheless, this view is not otherwise supported by my data as the dead who helped their descendants did not necessarily accomplish great feats during their lifetimes.

The second form of enshrinement that my ethnographic examples illustrate is the metamorphosis of some individuals into animals. Although not all deceased who become *petara* turn into animals, these examples are very interesting because it is especially through them that humankind is linked to the *petara* of the pantheon and to the mythical heroes who are birds or other animals.

Before discussing these examples, I want to stress that, in Rumah Manah at least, the dead who become *petara* are not regarded to be alive and their funeral rites are fully carried out, in contrast with Uchibori's data on this point. In fact, the rites are even accentuated. Thus, a deceased individual may be honored several times at the *gawai antu*, the final rite of installing the dead in the land of Sebayan. The deceased may be thanked either for precious jars or for other valuable goods bequeathed to the living or for posthumous assistance. This can happen in two ways. For example, a man had been especially prosperous and had given his children a jar each, which is quite rare. After his death, he was honored several times in different *gawai antu* by each of his children, who were scattered in different villages. In a different case, a deceased individual was honored by successive descendants in his apartment in successive *gawai antu*. As custom had it, his son honored him at the first *gawai antu* after his death, in 1956. In 1988, his grandson reiterated the rite, thus expressing his gratitude to his grandfather who was also supporting him in his activities and thus had become a *petara* for him as well. Once started, such a cycle must repeat itself an odd number of times, i.e., at least three times. Thus, the next generation will have to honor this ancestor at the next *gawai antu*.

Transformation of the Dead into an Animal

Contemporary transformation of the dead into animals is attested in oral history, thus linking the past and the current times. An episode of oral

history exemplifies the myth of origin of funeral rites and features a triple murder of Iban by Kantu warriors. On the eve of the events, the murdered men's sister climbs onto the longhouse roof where she cries and calls for her brothers. She asks that the first brother metamorphose into a *nabau* snake, the second into a gibbon, and the third into a crocodile (Sandin 1994: 96).

Birds are omens,⁸ as are, to a lesser extent, other animals (Freeman 1960: 78–79, Jensen 1974: 89, Perham in Roth 1980, I: 191–201, Sandin 1977: 2–4, 185, Sather 1980b: xxxii, 1985: 6). Their most eminent representative, Singalang Burong, is the Brahminy kite. His sons-in-law, who are the main omens, are birds. Other living things may also act as omens. Reptiles are often associated with mythical heroes, especially cobras (*tedong*), pythons (*sawa'*), coral snakes (*kendawang*), and hamadryads or king cobras (*belalang*) (Sather 1985: 6–7). Some animals and insects also act as omens and are believed to be servants of the “divinity” of the soil and rice crops, Simpulang Gana.⁹ These creatures include the lizard *belangkiang*, caterpillars (*ulat bulu*), the tarsier (*ingkat*), slow loris (*bengkang*), monitor lizard (*menarat*), barking deer (*kijang*), mouse deer (*pelandok*), porcupine (*landak*), bear (*beruang*), wild pig (*jani*), and sambur deer (*rusa'*) (Sather 1985: 7).¹⁰ There are limits to such categorization, as Sather (1985) notes, as the same animal may represent more than one kind of omen. According to my findings, Iban villagers seem more inclined to look for what lies behind the appearance of an animal than to give it a pre-set identity.

How do Iban specialists interpret these creatures? For Sather (1985: 6), they are corporeal forms that divinities of the same name have borrowed, or animal or birds concealing an *antu*. For Freeman (1960: 76, 78), they are gods metamorphosed into birds or representations of divinities. For Perham (in Roth 1980, I: 200), they are animal forms possessed by the spirits of invisible beings. The prevailing interpretation is thus to associate them with invisible entities.

What do Iban villagers say when a deceased individual appears as a python or a deer? They say that he or she has “become” (*nyadi*) a python or a deer and not that he or she has taken on its appearance or is associated with it. These beings come into existence as a result of transformations – lasting transformations in the case of some people. They *are* the animals. This assertion is also made in a myth. A father pursues his daughter's abductors and finds a route that leads him to their longhouses.

As he observed the longhouses he realized that although the people there behaved in a human manner, they were actually tigers in the shape of men (Sandin 1994: 81).

Similarly, when Simpang Impang, a culture hero, looks after the children of his adoptive mother, they turn out to be rats (Sather 1994a: 145). The true nature of *antu* is not so much anthropomorphic as transformative. It is because of this fundamental characteristic that such animals will not be eaten: because they are *antu*, and potentially benevolent ones. In my view, this testifies to the very real link with the animal too. Sather (this volume) notes rightly that an alternative Iban expression to “becoming an animal” is “concealing an *antu*” (*karong antu*). I have recorded a similar use of the expression *karong antu*, but applied to humans. The villagers from Rumah Manah say that the more spectacular successes of particular people are the result of these people concealing an *antu*. Their body is like an envelope to that invisible entity. Some examples given also suggest a kind of transformation of the body; in one case, the palms or feet of a man became like a stone charm after he had been blessed by an *antu*.¹¹

The link to the animal world is perceived as a real one created by metamorphosis. The transformation of deceased individuals into snakes notably places them right next to the mythical heroes who *are* snakes, suggesting that the same phenomenon may explain the origin of the *Orang Panggau*, the mythical heroes. The analogy may be developed further. The mythical heroes are descendants of the mythical dragon *nabau*, but they may owe this filiation as much to a successive series of transformations as to genealogical ties. This, in any case, is suggested by some recent examples of “snake lineages.” These lineages are the result of several bilaterally related deceased individuals being transformed into the same kind of animal. Belonging to a snake lineage increases the likelihood of transformation into a snake, but such a person does not come into this world as a snake. He or she becomes a snake through later metamorphosis. If several individuals undergo this transformation, the villagers will conceive of them as a “lineage” (*peturun*). In this sense, the lineages consist, not of a series of generations of animals, but rather of a series of transformed individuals who together produce a same-species lineage.

When a transformation of contemporary deceased individuals occurs, this represents the very same process that brought forth the mythical heroes and the great *petara*. In my view, the most significant benevolent entities are

transformed ancestors¹² who, through their transformation, created an ancestral link between humans and the bird and animal worlds. Their transformation differs from others in degree but not in kind. The relatively recently transformed dead are less powerful. They help only a few people, usually their immediate descendants, over the span of one generation. In the cases of transformation I have gathered, a deceased individual will seldom help someone and continue to give assistance to others after that person's death. The support networks of today's helping ancestors are personalized and must be recreated in each generation. By comparison, the mythical heroes and the great *petara* assist a much broader range of people over both time and space. In so far as their support is personalized, it is also much more powerful in terms of the success they permit. When someone achieves region-wide renown in a prestigious walk of life, the success is always due to assistance from an important entity.

Finally, among the Iban in contrast to some hunter-gatherer societies, a hunted animal is by default an ordinary living being that may be consumed without any process of "despiritualization." The attitude radically changes, however, should an animal behave or appear in a way that suggests it is a transformed ancestor, this usually being confirmed by a dream. Then, all of the ancestor's descendants must obey a dietary taboo on the animal. Thus, two thirds of Rumah Manah villagers refuse to eat python, being related in one way or another to an ancestor who became one. The remaining third are free to eat python. This snake species, as such, has not become sacred. By default, animals – and plants – are thus living beings that may be consumed. But should an animal prove to be a deceased individual, a dietary taboo is imposed on his or her descendants and an appropriate social relationship is required. A living being may always become an invisible entity, and vice versa.

The Iban differ from hunter-gatherers also in another major way. Among the latter, the "divinities" are animals that offer themselves to humans and are hunted and consumed with proper rituals. This is not generally the case among the Iban although the dead may sometimes transform themselves into deer which are hunted. The main characteristic of the *petara*, the benevolent entities, is not so much to support humans by being hunted and providing them with meat, as to help them in their prestigious undertakings.

Conclusion

Are there ancestors and a cult of ancestors among the Iban? The minority of the dead who stay around the living as benevolent *antu* might be considered

ancestors. They are said to have become *petara* and are treated accordingly with offerings and requests for support. This minority of the dead is thus merged with the larger group of benevolent entities (*petara*), which includes the great *petara* and the mythical heroes. As *petara*, they are propitiated in rituals as someone's specific *petara*. In this respect, these ancestors indeed represent a "selected few among the multitude of ordinary deceased forebears," although they have not obtained their position as a result of a "special rite . . . held to install these selected few as ancestors" (Sellato 2002: 14). In this regard, Iban ancestors are not like the typical ancestors usually encountered in the ethnography of ancestor worship for whom Sellato attempts to restrict use of the word.

Ingold's (2000) conception of ancestrality helps us to grasp the key significance of these "selected few" among the Iban. His definition of ancestrality encompasses multiple relationships with beings of various origins: humans of the past, spirits of the landscape, original creators, etc. In his understanding, the relationships with all these beings are crucial aspects of ancestrality which express the importance of animism. This is the case also for the Iban, among whom animism covers the ability to relate properly to a multitude of invisible beings of various origins (human, animal, plant, or mineral), some benevolent, some malevolent.

This vast web of relationships represents a "sphere of nurture" in which humans are grown (Ingold 2000: 144). The notion of such a sphere of nurture is echoed in the Iban expression that the *petara* or *aki' ini* sustain the life of humans. By this, they mean that the *petara* (including the deceased who have become *petara*) help support humans in their activities, especially in prestige-generating activities: rice-growing, acquisition of valuable goods, headhunting, weaving, mastering customary law, public speaking or ritual chants, and, recently, getting well-paid jobs in the civil service or business sectors. No one can succeed in any of these fields without the help of an invisible entity. Support is generally accorded to one individual, usually by a close kin of him, and ceases at his death. Relationships are constantly being created and recreated by everybody, thus providing each person with a unique web of relationships.

Some of the dead who have become *petara* transform themselves into animals and are treated as omens. This transformation establishes a connection between the ancestors, on the one hand, and augural birds, snakes, and animals, on the other. This conclusion pertains also to the great *petara*, who are birds or animals, and the mythical heroes, who are snakes. I propose that these beings are actually transformed ancestors. This form of ancestrality

differs significantly from the one reported for hunter-gatherers in many parts of the world. Indeed, among the Iban, it is based mainly on support in prestige-generating activities instead of in hunting.

Metamorphosis is thus the main process by which ancestorship is created. The same process is at work in the creation of the malevolent *antu* too. The *antu gerasi*, for example, resulted from Telichu's transformation. It is also well known in the literature that women who died during childbirth turned into such malevolent spirits. This avenue of research merits further work. Transformation can occur before death (as with Telichu or in the example of the living villager who was transformed into a *petara* for someone else), even though today transformation most often involves deceased individuals. There are other significant metamorphoses, such as the transformation of deceased individuals into dew, and from dew into rice and *pua'* blankets. The transformation of precious jars into deer is yet another example of such metamorphoses not dealt with here.

These are some examples of metamorphosis that involve a passage between two dimensions of reality: the dimension of human and living beings and that of invisible entities. Both dimensions and the multiple forms of passages from one to another through metamorphosis are central features of the Iban animist universe, and much more important as such than the Christian Western dichotomies between the living and the dead, this world and the afterworld. Metamorphosis is a grand opening to the Iban world.

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Notes

1 This fieldwork followed a five-month previous stay in 1991 for my master's degree in a village on the mid-Layar, near Betong in the Second Division of Sarawak. I have renamed this village *Rumah Manah*. For more details on the fieldwork, see Béguet (2006: chapter 3).

2 Metamorphosis of humans is a common phenomenon among the Iban (Béguet 2006: Chapter 4), but it is involuntary and uncontrolled. Only sorcerers can metamorphose deliberately. The *antu* also have this power and it is one of their main characteristics. In addition, they can cause living beings to be transformed (Béguet 2006: Chapter 6), a point that is seldom addressed in the ethnographic literature except for examples of petrification.

3 The same closeness with dreams is attested in a different context, as in shamanism for instance, except that the movement of the shaman's *semengat* is controlled by the words he is uttering (Freeman 1967: 317, Sather 2001: 29, Uchibori 1978: 15).

4 The term *menoa*, meaning place of origin, is relative. It is the longhouse from which one comes, the river basin of one's village and other villages, or even one's country when living abroad. It is the territory that one is native to and/or inhabits.

5 Culture heroes are born from the union of a human with an invisible being or a "natural element" (fire, wind, a star, etc.), but they are human ancestors and not invisible entities.

6 Other diverse combinations include the marriage of a culture hero with a porcupine's daughter and that of a woman with an *antu gerasi*.

7 The association between a log and a python comes up in the literature (Ling Roth 1980).

8 The term *burong* ("bird") is the root of the word used to designate the practice of augury: *beburong*.

9 Simpulang Gana is married to a porcupine's daughter.

10 Simpulang Gana also has minor attendants who occasionally appear. All of them are small animals or insects (Sather 1985: 7).

11 It links this process to another form of transformation, the petrification of any living being into stone (*batu*) by an *antu*. That process is at the basis of the creation of charms: the particular use is suggested by the *antu* in a dream (Béguet 2006: chapter 6).

12 This conclusion may apply to all significant *antu*, be they benevolent or malevolent. The *antu gerasi*, for example, resulted from Telichu's transformation. This

avenue of research, however, was not investigated and merits further work. In the past, such transformations could occur before death (as with Telichu), even though today they always involve deceased individuals.

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CHAPTER 6

Invoking Ne' Rake: Ancestral Comrades in Contemporary Bornean Warfare

Christian Oesterheld

“ANCESTORS,” “ANCESTRAL MAGIC,” AND “ANCESTRAL rituals” are terms which have frequently been mentioned in various accounts of the recent Dayak–Madurese conflict in West and Central Kalimantan. In mass media reports, “the realm of the ancestors” has usually featured in close association with “headhunting” and “ritual cannibalism.” In response, academics discussing ethnic violence in contemporary Kalimantan have widely dismissed the issue as sensationalism. Consequently, I argue, a distorted image of (re)invented or (re)discovered traditions has been created. This chapter aims to re-examine the topic of ancestral possession and comradeship in Dayak–Madurese warfare, and to illuminate conceptions of ancestors within the changing social environment of present-day Borneo, an important characteristic of which is the continuous rise of an inter-regional Dayak identity.

In reconsidering some themes which, for the “perpetrators,” have been central features of the events, this chapter tries to adopt an emic perspective, relying on a considerable number of interviews with persons who have mostly been engaged as active combatants.¹ Although their performance during anti-Madurese warfare has been obscured by discourses in the local and international mass media, reproduced by NGOs as well as by academics, it is clear for me that these combatants strongly believed in what they did and, especially, in how they thought it had to be done. Like virtually everything in the “Dayak worldview,” warfare has to follow *adat*, certain rules of conduct pertaining to legal and ethical issues, as well as to laws of nature – but also including secret knowledge regarding strength and power. Whether Dayak people have been blamed or defended in the various

accounts of ethnic conflict in Kalimantan published in recent years, they usually have been *spoken for* and have rarely themselves been given voice. This chapter is neither written to accuse and blame, nor to defend or excuse the Dayak fighters. However, it aims to provide an emic understanding of the ongoing debate, backed by an anthropological analysis of the ritual performances and underlying notions which structure contemporary Dayak warfare practices. No new discovery regarding the “hidden causes” of the conflict itself will be offered.

The Dayak–Madurese Conflict in Kalimantan

In early March 2001, just two weeks after ethnic violence between “indigenous Dayaks” and “Madurese settlers” – to use the vocabulary of the mass media – had rocked the province of Central Kalimantan, the official tolls counted tens of thousands of refugees and nearly 500 casualties (however, unofficial sources stated up to 7000 casualties). Soon the strife was declared to be the most violent outbreak of ethnic violence in Kalimantan to date – and by that it topped a series of similar events formerly concentrated in the neighbouring province of West Kalimantan. There, the Madurese had been fought by a gathering of Dayak people from several districts in early 1997 (after quarrels between youngsters during a *dangdut* concert in December 1996), and again in early 1999 by a Malay and Dayak alliance in Sambas district (after a series of criminal cases inflicted by Madurese individuals upon members of one or the other of the indigenous communities). Although almost unnoticed by the academic debate prior to 1996–97, anti-Madurese violence in either province was not actually a new phenomenon.² The history of ethnic conflict in Central Kalimantan dates back to at least 1982, and West Kalimantan experienced uprisings of this sort sporadically from the 1950s and on a considerably larger scale in the late 1970s and early 1980s.³

A detailed report by Human Rights Watch/Asia about the 1997 riots in West Kalimantan shares the first impression of most immediate observers of the violence, saying that “Dayaks waged what appeared to be a ritual war against Madurese communities” (HRW 1997). Indeed, some of the more visible characteristics of the conflicts included the deployment of various kinds of magic, a wide range of pre-, in-, and post-war ritual practices, and exotic forms of violence, including headtaking and ritual cannibalism. Local media reports had detailed stories about the “flying *Mandau*,” “spirit possession” of the Dayak fighters, their mystical war generals (*pangkalima*)

and other kinds of magico-ritual powers. Overseas mass media stressed in particular the strange way of killing – headtaking and ritual cannibalism – in sensationalist reports.

In most cases, the response by academics, as well as by local and international NGOs, was strict in its dismissal of these obviously exaggerated depictions. A growing academic debate soon focused on explanations of the “hidden” causes of the riots, often proposing socio-economic and socio-political conditions as the answer. The side-effects of economic crisis and political transition in Indonesia in the late 1990s were said to have set the scene for religious and ethnic uprisings, and the steady growth of separatist movements all over the archipelago. For many observers, the overall situation represented the legacy of the centralist *New Order* government, disreputed for its political and economic marginalization of the “outer islands.” In these accounts, the commercial exploitation of forest resources associated with the neglect of the traditional land rights of indigenous peoples, as well as a failed identity politics in pushing the *Pancasila* programme, had created a tense situation which exploded in violent uprisings when the *New Order* regime came to an end. Some in-depth accounts have broadened the scope of analysis in explaining the ethnic conflicts in Kalimantan as informed by local historical developments in terms of territorial politics (Peluso and Harwell 2001, Somers Heidhues 2001) and the rise of an institutionalized “Dayak” identity, producing local elites and new ethnic ideologies (van Klinken 2002 and 2005).

Turning away from the eye-catching imagery of “headhunting Dayak warriors” (Parry 1999), “mimicking the ritualistic killings of their ancestors” (Nation 1999) in an “outbreak of ethnic violence and grisly murders” (SCMP 1999), “gruesome ritual killings” (CNN 1999), or “ritual savagery” (Watts 1999), academics insisted that “this was no ritual but terror directed against the Madurese” since “the headhunting was devoid of the old ritual context” (Colombijn 2001: 37). Writing about the Dayak–Madurese clashes in West Kalimantan, Horowitz (2000: 95) stated that “customary modes are often imagined rather than authentically uncovered.” Similarly, Dove (2006: 195) has suggested that

... much of the Dayak ideology attending the conflict (e.g., the assertion that the warriors who ate the flesh of their enemies were possessed by spirits) seems to have been invented for the occasion, perhaps drawing and building on external, essentialized images of the Dayak.

The notion of “(re)invented” or “(re)imagined” traditions has dominated academic explanations of the odd repertoire of violent practices in Dayak–Madurese conflicts (e.g., Harwell 2000, Peluso 2006: 125, Peluso and Harwell 2001: 85, Smith 2005: 9). Statements of the directly involved combatants, if given voice, have been rendered meaningless, or described as driven by “tactics.” Ritual performances have been depicted as “weapons of the wild” strategically exploiting the “image of the Bornean headhunter” as a mere means in warfare (Peluso 2003 and 2006).

It is uncontested that the taking of the enemies’ heads during the conflicts did not necessarily refer to practices of “traditional headhunting” – if this denotes raids with the purpose to obtain human heads to be used in traditional rituals, such as those held to end periods of mourning. Emic accounts agree that anti-Madurese warfare was not aimed at obtaining heads. But, many of my informants would quickly add that this was rarely the aim of warfare on a larger scale even in former times. Headhunting in the strict sense (*ngayo* in most West Kalimantan Dayak languages) was outlawed by both the Dutch and the Brooke colonial administrations during the nineteenth century. However, the practice of headtaking, and the attendant rituals it necessitated, were occasionally encouraged by the colonial regimes during “pacification” raids against hostile Dayak groups. In fact, headtaking had long been a common pattern of revenge feuds between neighbouring Dayak groups and, later, it was widely practiced in anti-colonial uprisings. In this sense, headtaking endured until the end of colonial rule and blossomed again in anti-Japanese guerrilla operations during World War II. Despite being unanimous with academic accounts in their dismissal of a simple headhunting imagery, active fighters of the anti-Madurese strife did not depict the events as “social unrest,” neither “spontaneous” nor “mobilized” nor “induced,” but as war (*perang* <BI>⁴ *baparakng babunuh* <Kanayatn>) in a straightforward sense.

Sampit, 2001: “Ancestral Homelands” Defended by “Ancestral Power”

Socio-economic and socio-political marginalization of Indonesia’s outer islands, including Kalimantan, during *New Order* rule is a widely undisputed fact which Dayak people are well aware of. Their political autonomy had been diminished by the superimposed Javanese administration apparatus, they had been deprived of their traditional land rights, their forests had

been exploited by national and international companies, and transmigration programmes had bred social conflict over ever scarcer resources, both land and labour. However, active combatants in Sampit 2001 would not explain their anger towards “the Madurese” in terms of any of these arguments. When going to war, they believed they responded to – or anticipated – an impending Madurese plot to take over power in Central Kalimantan, first at the district level in East Kotawaringin, later in the whole province. Evidence for this plot had been collected by the *Lembaga Musyawarah Masyarakat Dayak dan Daerah Kalimantan Tengah*, a Central Kalimantan NGO, and was submitted to the then Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid in form of a report which became well known as the “Red Book” (LMMDD-KT 2001). Although the validity of the report’s findings has been questioned and some of the documents it contained have been suspected to be “fabrications” to serve political ends (van Klinken 2001 and 2002), as a whole it represented – and reinforced – a widespread fear of a Madurese plot to take over power. As Schröder and Schmidt have put it, “Not even modern state elites with modern media apparatuses at their disposal can invent confrontations out of nothing” (2001: 9).⁵

“Ancestors” and “Ancestral Magic” in Accounts of Ethnic Violence in Sampit

The Madurese plot was believed to be directed against the ‘ancestral homeland’ and ‘ancestral traditions’ (*tanah dan adat leluhur* <BI>) of Dayak people. Following are some excerpts from an open letter by a local group of fighters, addressed “To: Everybody.”⁶ It is a good summary of the main issues which have been advanced in regard to the role of ancestors in the Dayak–Madurese conflict. When deciding to take over Central Kalimantan, the document says, the Madurese

... should have understood that Sampit was part of Central Kalimantan and it has been created by the Almighty God for the Dayak ancestors. It is clear that our God as well as our ancestors do not approve on our homeland being taken over by Madurese. . . . It was the real manifestation of our God and ancestors’ help to the Dayak to enable them to survive in their own homeland.

The issue of supernatural assistance is given more space towards the end of the document:

In certain circumstances, the spirits of our ancestors can merge into our bodies and soul to do what ever they want. Being under control of our ancestor's spirit, we do not realize what we do, besides, under this control any Dayak people are unhurt by any weapons. To carry out their missions, saving our soul, our ancestors work in their own ways. . . . Our ancestors will never take any action carelessly without any reasons. This means that if now they are taking any action on the reasons that they have to help their children/grandchildren and their descendants, they have a clear and appropriate reason.

Notably, neither the quoted passages, nor any other part of the document describes exactly what the ancestors' "own ways" of assistance were. Instead, the results of their presence are recalled in the document. Their "control" of the fighters is said to cause invulnerability. Another part of the document states that due to the ancestors' help,

. . . many people can see flying Mandau, or Madurese are suddenly killed, no body knows why.

Invulnerability and the "flying *mandau*" (a traditional Dayak sword) are both ingredients of a myth of "Dayak power," which is – either affirmatively or critically – discussed in many accounts of ethnic conflict in Kalimantan, especially in local media reports.⁷ The myth of "Dayak power" includes also an ability to "sniff out" the Madurese when hiding, the various supernatural abilities of Dayak *pangkalima* (ritual war generals), or mysterious troops of invisibles assisting in warfare. Usually these elements of power and strength are said to be closely related to the presence of "Dayak ancestors." Further descriptions usually are vague and varied. Invulnerability, for example, is sometimes gained by ritual bathing, sometimes by drinking magic oils, sometimes simply through possession by a helping spirit. Or one entails the other, since "after the warriors drank the [magic] oil they were in a trance 'possessed by ancestral spirits'" – and thus invulnerable.⁸ Yet in other accounts, magic oils do *not* cause invulnerability, rather "with their bottles of magical oil that they take to the battlefield, the Dayaks can sniff out a Madurese" (Economist 2001). Or, as some observers believe, these oils contained certain drugs to intoxicate the warriors' minds – they afterwards being capable of all kinds of cruelties.⁹ Similar confusion goes with reports on the "flying *mandau*." At times certain Dayak *pangkalima* were believed to have a kind of "remote-control" power on their swords. In other descriptions

it was invisible spirits who handled the *mandau* – which then appeared to be flying around.¹⁰ Some observers speak simply of “a return to the traditional religion and an appeal to the ancestors to help with their warrior spirits” (Schumann 2002: 165)¹¹ – whereby the present combatants are either said to be “possessed”¹² by these ancestral spirits or merely “assisted” by their invisible power. There has not been much of an attempt to come to terms about *what kind* of ancestors had been involved, or in which particular sense they actually *were* ancestors.

A single exception to this are stories about a *Panglima Burung* (or *Pangkalima Burung*) which dominated local media reports for some time and even appeared in the nation-wide and Southeast Asian regional press. Media reports presented an ambiguous image of this *Panglima Burung*, or ‘Bird General’, where the famous (West Kalimantan) resistance fighter *Panglima Burung* was merged with the mythological (Central Kalimantan) hawk *antang*.¹³ Approximate to the *antang* imagery of Ngaju mythology (Becker and Hupe in Schärer 1966: 142–144), *The Straits Times* (Singapore) reported that

The upriver Dayaks believe the mastermind behind the violence is a spirit ancestor that has taken the form of a female bird. . . . The Dayaks claimed they had seen the spirit bird, called Ampang [sic], flying above them as they clashed with the Madurese in recent days. . . . While it was difficult to pinpoint where the Madurese lived, the Dayaks claimed the Ampang had led them to the Madurese (Kearney 2001, cf. KP 2001b and Wijaya 2002: 30).

In Ngaju traditional belief the *antang* is the ‘spirit of the ancestral sanctuary’ (*ganan tajahan*) and can be called to become an omen bird. According to Schärer (1966: 876, 882–883) it is called *Rika Bulau Antang Ganan Tajahan* and can be described as the hypostasis of the spirits of the deceased. In some areas, there are reports about the *Antang* as being a single historical person, a Dayak elder from the Katingan river area who did not die but was, at great age, transformed into a hawk (Baier 2001: 101). In either version the *antang* functions as a mediator between the human realm and the realm of ancestral spirits. In warfare it leads the combatants (Klokke 2004: 171, 219, Riwut 1993: 338) and is, by some, supposed to join the fighting itself (Schärer 1966: 882). To my knowledge, the *antang* is not supposed to possess the fighters. However, some reports on the “legendary Bird-General, the mystical female leader of the Dayaks” (Brönnimann 2001), mix it with the more personal

Pangkalima Burung whom they suppose to be “a reincarnation of a Dayak ancestor from times immemorial,” but now stress that this ancestor’s spirit can “possess the soul of whatever Dayak it wants to be with” (BP 2001), regardless of gender or age. In fact, a “real,” human “Bird General” – a West Kalimantan Dayak leader famous for his role in resisting the Japanese occupation (Frans Layang 1981, KR 1998) – was still alive in 2001, but reportedly he had not been taking part in the anti-Madurese fighting in Sampit due to advanced age. Several leaders emerged during the conflict in Central Kalimantan presenting themselves as his disciples and supposedly having inherited his magic abilities.

The local weekly *Bebas* featured several, contradictory accounts about these leaders, producing much confusion regarding the issue of *Panglima Burung* among local and international observers by March 2001 (see Figure 6.1). In an interesting attempt at a critique of the local media, Eriyanto et al. (2004, especially pp. 101–147) have suspected that some of this confusion had been produced intentionally to obscure and mystify events. If this assessment is right, this obscurantism might have been serving at least two ends. On the one hand, it translated events of social violence and real suffering into a grammar of inaccessible mysticism, producing in its wake modern legends and new heroes, and, on the other hand, it blurred the divide between traditionally and culturally distinct combat groups. In fact, in Sampit 2001 not only the Central Kalimantan majority Ngaju group – and their Ma’anyan (Awan 2001) and Ot Danum (Rini 2005: 136) “upriver friends,” as well as Banjarese “coastal allies” – had been fighting the Madurese. Vast



Figure 6.1. *Bebas* covers featuring various depictions of the “Bird General.”

assistance was also provided from the neighbouring provinces of West and East Kalimantan. Both through communal mystification in media reports and through indigenous communal rituals, performed particularly when fighting ceased, all of these groups were accommodated and distinctions in magical and ritual practices downplayed in favour of “pan-Dayak traditions.” One of the rituals, which was performed in the district of East Kotawaringin in late March 2001, expresses these issues in an interesting way. At the peak of this ritual the district head of East Kotawaringin addressed the audience:

As the indigenous people of Kalimantan, the Dayak believe that besides by men this island here is also inhabited by spirits of the ancestors [*roh-roh leluhur*] and invisibles [*orang-orang gaib*], who always guard and protect the Dayak people. These spirits are believed to have taken part and helped the Dayak people in the present conflict in irrational ways which are hard to accept by human reason. And indeed because of their presence, Central Kalimantan in general, and the Dayak people in particular, were able to maintain and defend their dignity and self-esteem (Anwar 2001, my translation from the Indonesian).

A remarkably vague terminology of “Dayaks” and “their ancestors” had become part of a political programme to unite the “indigenous people” of the island against threats from the outside. The “Bird General” was present during the ritual in his twofold character: Lorensius Tubal, a West Kalimantan Kanayatn Dayak, whom *Bébas* had finally declared to be the successor of the “real” *Panglima Burung*, stood at the sacrificial pole where a water buffalo was tied, and in the sky people witnessed a hawk flying his rounds.

A Delegation of West Kalimantan Warriors – and their Ancestors – to Sampit, 2001

Not only was a substantial part of the “Bird General”-imagery imported from neighbouring West Kalimantan. Surprisingly, the early days of ethnic conflict in Central Kalimantan had been dominated by ritual practices which originate as traditions of West Kalimantan Dayaks. In fact, three days prior to the first clashes in Sampit, ancestral spirits had been invoked at a sacred place close to the village of Gulong in the area of the Merantik subdistrict in West Kalimantan, and a whole “army of invisibles” had been called upon to join the fighting. The rituals had been conducted by West Kalimantan shamans and there were three West Kalimantan Dayaks who, accompanied by this army of invisibles, departed for Sampit on 17 February 2001. The *Pangkalima*

Mangkok Merah ('War Leader of the Red Bowl', hereafter PMM), was one of them. I got to know him by accident, in July 2003, when actually looking for one of the various alleged *Pangkalima Burung* for an interview. Friends of the Archdiocese of Pontianak, whom I had asked to assist me in contacting him, said there would be little hope for reliable data in contacting *that Pangkalima Burung*. Instead they introduced me to PMM, with whom I subsequently stayed for several weeks at his home in the area of Gulong. As with most of the active fighters I interviewed between 2001 and 2007, he was rather scared when I arrived at his small hut for the first time. Reluctance to talk about their experiences persisted, in most cases, for these fighters for some days. However, after becoming sure that I neither represented "foreign *Intel*,"¹⁴ nor some Human Rights organization, they frankly shared their memories and perceptions regarding the "Dayak–Madurese war" during hours of free and easy chat, frequently joined by other villagers who sometimes just listened and sometimes contributed their own views regarding the issues in question.

Most often, people began their recollections with lengthy accounts regarding the local histories of "the Madurese problem" (*masalah Madura* <BI>). PMM was no exception. His account featured the local genealogies of events both in West and Central Kalimantan, to clarify why he actually departed for the neighbouring province in mid-February 2001. In the following, I wish to present a short summary of the local histories of Dayak–Madurese conflict, with a particular stress on the events and developments which mattered most in PMM's view.

As mentioned earlier, both provinces draw on a longstanding history of Dayak–Madurese conflict. But when West Kalimantan was already caught up in large-scale rioting by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Dayak–Madurese clashes in Central Kalimantan were still confined to inter-personal arguments. Moreover, the Madurese community had widely been cooperative in getting arguments resolved according to local traditions. For example, when Pulai, a Ngaju Dayak, was killed by a Madurese in 1983 in Bukit Batu, Kasongan, the *tiwah* (Ngaju death ritual) celebrated for him had been paid for by the perpetrator's family.¹⁵ Since several criminal cases with inter-ethnic backgrounds had taken place during the preceding years, the *tiwah* in question accommodated "a peace settlement between leaders of the Dayak and Madurese communities in which the Madurese agreed that if any Madurese 'spilt the blood' of a Dayak, the Madurese would voluntarily leave Central Kalimantan" (ICG 2001: 3). Indeed, after this pact the situation remained peaceful until the mid-1990s, when crimes inflicted by Madurese on Dayak

people suddenly accumulated. Differing from the early 1980s, these cases were rarely resolved in accordance with local tradition. Also, they were no longer limited to mere inter-personal arguments but, bit by bit, involved larger groups of people.¹⁶ Additionally, the police were said to be biased in favour of the Madurese, working ineffectively and repeatedly releasing suspects, thus producing growing anger among the Dayak population. The last case in a series of murders, rapes, and thefts took place in mid-December 2000 in Kereng Pangi, when Sendong, a Ngaju youth, was stabbed to death by a group of Madurese at a *karaoke* bar.¹⁷ The tense situation in the mid-1990s was further heated by the earlier-mentioned rumours of a Madurese plot designed to violently take over power in Central Kalimantan.

According to a number of my interviewees, documents regarding Madurese secret organizations had been discovered by a Dayak married to a Madurese, including accounts of the purchase of various kinds of grenades and small arms. An anonymous bomb threat reported to the provincial police by Hang Siau, the manager of *Telaga Biru*, a well-known shop in Palangka Raya, seems to have backed up the rumours (KP 2001a and Sulhan 2006: 96–100). The atmosphere of immediate threat, in combination with a declining trust in the security forces, finally led a gathering of local NGOs and intellectuals to seek assistance from their “brothers and sisters” (*saudara kita* <BI>) in West Kalimantan, who were supposed to be much more experienced in “Madurese matters” as a result of the ethnic conflicts in the late 1990s. PMM told me that he and his companions had been contacted by the West Kalimantan Adat Council (*Majelis Adat Kalimantan Barat*) and informed about the impending threat of a Madurese uprising in Central Kalimantan. Immediately they had undergone the necessary ritual preparations at a sacred place in the forest where the spirits of some particular ancestors are stored in wooden statues (*pantak*), and, accompanied by the earlier-mentioned army of invisibles, departed to assist their brothers in the neighbouring province.

Ancestors in Northwest Borneo Societies

In terms of ethnicity, PMM and his fellow combatants from West Kalimantan would identify themselves as *Urakng Ahe*, *Ba'ahe*, or *Urakng Banyuke*. *Urakng Ahe* and *Ba'ahe* translate as ‘Ahe-speaking people’, while *Urakng Banyuke* refers to their area of residence alongside the Banyuke river (also sometimes called Menyuke or Manyuke). During several West Kalimantan ethnic uprisings, the Banyuke Dayaks of the Darit area (Merantik and Menyuke

subdistricts) became famous for their “aggressiveness” (Bamba 2006: 120). They recall a longstanding history of tribal feuding with the neighbouring Dayak Bakati’ in Sambas district and the Dayaks of Mempawah (Ranik 2000: 26). All three groups have recently often been subsumed under the politically charged “ethnic” label of Kanayatn, together with a vast number of other ethnic (sub-)groups from the northern part of West Kalimantan (see Niagara 2005–06, Weintré 2004: 80), despite the extraordinary ethno-linguistic diversity of the region (cf. Alloy et al. 2000, Bamba 2002).

It is true that many of the ethnic groups in northwest Borneo share a range of cosmological conceptions, similar features in *adat* (law and customs) and ritual practices (Djuweng 1997: VI), which also reflect a basic “northwest Borneo” conception of ancestors, whereby a certain group of the recently deceased function as mediators between the living and the divinity (which itself mostly originates as more remote, “deified” ancestors). For this reason it is illuminating to include ethnographic data from adjacent areas in the following account of perceptions of ancestry in Ahe/Banyuke society. Linguistic boundaries will be disregarded, even in respect of the major linguistic divide between West Kalimantan “Malayic Dayak” on the one hand, and “Land Dayak” (Hudson 1970) or “Bidayuhic” (Collins 1998) groups of Sarawak and West Kalimantan on the other hand.

Theogony and Cosmology in Northwest Borneo

Early sources (Dunselman 1949–50, Hoek 1949 and Schadée 1903–08) describe the northwest Borneo pantheon as consisting of basically three groups of spirit beings. First, there are the *kamang*, considered to be mostly malevolent, particularly responsible for causing sickness. They are the spirits that can be called upon to assist in warfare and headhunting raids. Second, there are the benevolent and high-ranking *jubata*, which some sources regard as a Hindu-Javanese influence in Dayak cosmology from the time of Majapahit. The various embodiments of this group of spirits are usually given the title *Ne'*, meaning grandfather/grandmother (as in *Ne' Pajiji* or *Ne' Panitah*) (Dunselman 1949–50: 365, Nungkat 1994: 73, 77, Thomson 2000: 135). This suggests that *jubata* (or *tampa* in Sadong terminology) originate from ancestors who have become deified and have left the human realm. *Dewa*, the third category, are regarded as spirits of Islamic-Malay origin, adopted at a later stage. Additionally, there are various hierarchically and functionally less important groups of spirits – including *pujut*, *tayam*, *maw-ing*, *kuntianak* and others – which seem to elude clear categorization. In

most sources they are either listed one by one, or simply summarized as *hantu*.

A recent account of traditional Kanayatn religion depicts a hierarchically organized three-tiered cosmos. The upperworld is the realm of *jubata*, “usually believed to reside on the summit of a sacred mountain,”¹⁸ and below the visible world (*talino*), where humans dwell, is another underworldly realm (*sabayatn*), which forms “the dwelling place of the spirits (*roh-roh halus*) and the spirits of deceased humans” (Thomson 2000: 64). Thomson states that “the three realms are joined together by ties of blood” (*ibid.*). Later, his account distinguishes between “god-type spirits, ancestral spirits, and the spirits that derived from deceased people but that have taken on special characteristics and seem to be in a different class” (2000: 65). In this classification, “god-type spirits” refers to the *jubata*, while “ancestral spirits” include the anonymous collectivity of the deceased, from which are excluded particular spirits like the *kuntianak/bintianak* (derived from women who died in childbirth), the *pujut* (strangled people) and various other *hantu*. The *kamang*, which played an important role in the course of Dayak–Madurese violence, are not discussed in terms of their origins or relationship with other spirits in Thomson’s account, although, like the aforementioned earlier sources, he describes at some length their function in war (2000: 67, 103–104).

Dayak Ahe Cosmology and its Conception of Ancestral spirits

Despite his critique of the indiscriminate use of the term “ancestor” in Bornean ethnography, Sellato (2002: 13–15) acknowledges the existence among the “Kendayan” (Kanayatn) of ancestors defined in a strict sense, that is, a restricted number of dead forebears “whose deeds are meaningful to society” (2002: 13). Moreover, “there must be a special ritual establishing certain outstanding dead as ancestors” (2002: 14). On the contrary, Thomson’s idea that “ties of blood” connect the human realm with both upper- and underworld at first implies that *all* spirit beings could be regarded as “ancestors” if a very broad understanding of the term is used. Although Thomson later excludes some “special” and “god-type” spirits from this collectivity, he stresses that “there appears to be little practical distinction” between ancestors and these other spirits (2000: 65). In Ahe society, I argue, the idea of “ancestors” is indeed different from both of these conceptions.

Since no specific term in the Ahe language corresponds to the English “ancestor,” I used the Indonesian words *leluhur* and *nenek moyang* in my interviews in the area of Gulong. My informants understood and used these Indonesian terms for the collectivity of the deceased. However, they stressed that there indeed are some “particular ancestors” (*leluhur tertentu*) who have a distinct place in the ritual life of the community. People can resort to them for assistance in a straightforward way, but more frequently they function as mediators between the human realm and the *jubata* and *kamang* spirits. Yet, in certain contexts also *jubata* and *kamang* themselves would be declared *leluhur* by my informants. The “benevolent” *jubata* are addressed in context of all rituals connected to life and fertility (childbirth, marriage, agricultural rites, etc.). The “dangerous” – but not particularly malevolent – *kamang* are called for assistance in warfare. Both groups of spirits seem to be derived from mythological ancestors and have to be called upon via other less remote, historical, ancestors.

These historical ancestors indeed represent “a selected few among the multitude of ordinary deceased forebears” (Sellato 2002: 14). Already in life they stand out from ordinary people by their possession of *pama*, a kind of divine soul substance which diffuses blessings upon the whole community. It complements the complex structure of souls which constitute a person’s vitality (cf. Dunselman 1949–50: 172–177, Thomson 2000: 70–77). The most important souls are *nyawa* (‘vital force’) and *sumangat* (‘mind’). If *nyawa* leaves, a person dies. When the *sumangat* leaves, a person’s state of mind changes; dreaming, illness, etc. are considered to be due to a temporary leave of *sumangat*. The *pama* is attached to the *sumangat* and should be seen as representing soul substance rather than soul itself.¹⁹ It is only associated with great people like shamans, successful headhunters, or *adat* leaders. Schadée (1910: 471–472) even considers those who have *pama* as “being descendants from the divinity.” After these outstanding people die it is important for their community not to lose the beneficial force of their *pama*. Therefore it is “stored” either in sacred stones or in anthropomorphic wooden effigies (*pantak*). The *pama* is ritually transferred into these *pantak* (cf. Stöhr 1959: 142–147), a practice which is called *dipanaki* in Kanayatn language.²⁰

Bahari Sinju (1993: 5–6, 1997: 37) distinguishes three different kinds of *pantak* among the Kanayatn, namely *pantak panyugu* (erected for *papadi-atn*, ritual specialists, in the context of agriculture), *pantak padagi* (erected by the whole village community for war leaders, *pangalanok*, and medical shamans, *balian*),²¹ and *pantak kaluarga* (erected for wealthy people by



Figure 6.2. Examples of *pantak* and *panyugu* from the Ahe (Banyuke) area.

their heirs). However, in the Banyuke area the term *panyugu* is used for sacred stones which are erected for the *balian* (see Figure 6.2). My informants stressed that the wooden *pantak* are exclusively erected for war leaders (*pangalanok* or *urakng barani*) or wealthy people. Both *panyugu* stones and *pantak* statues of *urakng barani* are erected at sacred spots in the forest, close to the deceased person's village. These places are called *padagi* (see also Dunselman 1949–50: 94). Ahe/Banyuke society recognizes *pantak kaluarga* as well, but these are erected close to the deceased person's home.

After death, a person's *sumangat* is supposed to continue living. Usually the *sumangat* will ascend to a kind of heavenly afterworld (*sabayatn*), where the spirits of the deceased gather, without interfering much with the human realm (*talino*). The *sumangat* of outstanding people, however, to which *pama* is attached, is supposed to either “go back to [the] *jubata*” (Thomson 2000: 75) or to be “transferred into the community of the *kamang*” (Stöhr 1959: 138, my translation). Whether a person's *sumangat* enters the realm of the *jubata* or that of the *kamang* depends on his or her position in life. Ritual specialists in “matters of life” (agriculture, medicine, etc.), the *papadiatn* and the *balian*, become associated with the *jubata*, whereas those specialising in “matters of death” (headhunting and warfare), the *pangalanok* and the *pangalima*, or simply *urakng barani* (brave people), become associated with the *kamang*. They do not “become” a *kamang* in the afterworld, as has sometimes been suggested (e.g., Green 1909: 67, Tiras 1997),²² but they “dwell close to them,” as my informants in the Banyuke area put it. Similarly Dunselman (1949–50: 94, my translation) states that extraordinary people

after death enter the realm of a “community of deified ancestors or *awa pama* and especially that of the *kamang*.”

However, as I suggested earlier, *kamang* and *jubata* seem to derive from mythological ancestors, more remote than those ancestors whose *pama* has been installed in *pantak*. For the latter, genealogical ties to the living are remembered in great detail and only their descendants can call upon them during ritual performances at the *pantak* or *panyugu*. During rituals the historical ancestors function as messengers between the community of the living and the more remote, deified (and thus more powerful) mythological ancestors (i.e., the *kamang* and the *jubata*). As for the *jubata*, their genealogical ties with the living are not remembered anymore, and in the case of most of the *kamang*, these ties never even existed. The following discussion concentrates on the *kamang*, who were most prominently described as “ancestral spirits” during the Dayak–Madurese conflicts of West Kalimantan.

Due to their propensity for warfare and violence, *kamang* have often been described as “malevolent.” Their “joy is in the misery of mankind,” and they are causing sickness and death (Low 1848: 250 for western Sarawak, and Schadée 1903–08: 540 for the western part of Dutch Borneo). My Ahe informant rather called them “powerful” and potentially “dangerous” – “if treated in the wrong way” (see also Vermi 1997: 36). In some older sources Kamang Tariu appears as a “nature spirit who regulates the climate” (Tillema 1930 [1886]: 346), without any connection to warfare. However, a somewhat standardized account has Kamang Tariu as the “highest” *kamang* and describes him as “patron of the headhunters,” joined particularly by seven siblings with various names.²³ In nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts about the Land Dayak of western Sarawak, *kamang* and *tariu* are depicted as two different groups of spirits, which are at odds with one another. In these sources, the *tariu* are helpful spirits, resembling human nature in their appearance, whereas the *kamang* are said to be “hideous and savage” and “in person, they are as disgustingly ugly as they are barbarous and cruel in their dispositions: their bodies are covered, like those of the Oran-utan, with long and shaggy red hair: they are mis-shapen and contorted, and their favourite food is the blood of the human race” (Low 1848: 250).²⁴

Ritual specialists in the area of Gulong explained that most of the *kamang* are the spirits of “bachelors who did not come back,” either from warfare and headhunting, or from going *bertapa* (isolating oneself, usually at sacred places in the woods, in caves or at mountain tops, to acquire

magical powers). Indeed, many of them are given the title *bujakng* ('bachelors'). Most frequently, and among a great variety of northwest Borneo peoples, Bujakng Nyangko is mentioned (Rubenstein 1973: I, 281–694 for the Sarawak Bidayuh; Ranik 2000 and Schadée 1903–08: 540 for the Banyuke; Dalawi 1996, Dunselman 1949–50: 63–65, and Nungkat 1994: 56 for the Kanayatn more generally). Some prominence is also ascribed to Bujakng Barangan, Bujakng Gila Palepak, and Bujakng Pabaras (Bider 2002, Ranik 2000, SiaR 1997, Schadée 1903–08: 540, and Suaka 1999). For all of these spirits, distinct etiological knowledge exists at least among ritual specialists in northwest Borneo. An extensive number of other *kamang* are mentioned both by local informants and in various printed sources. When their origins are unclear, they are given more simple names which reflect merely their attributes. There is, for example, Kamakng Bungsu (the last-born Kamang), and Kamakng Satime Babuluh (Kamang with the hairy chest), and there are Kamakng Ngibukng Sebatakng (Kamang with the *nibung*-wood stick) and Sanyaru' Batangan Tangkin ('the one with sword-hands').

I stated earlier that the *sumangat* of brave people (*urakng barani*) do not turn into *kamang* immediately after death. However, in the course of time, when loss of memory blurs genealogical lines, it can indeed be said that the "ranks" of the *kamang* "are joined by the spirits of brave men" (Green 1909: 67). As I could observe, some of the *pantak* at the *padagi* near Gulong were placed there by former generations for outstanding people whose local descent lines had long died out because their descendants migrated to another village. These ancestors have become a "common property" of the people of Gulong, similar to the remote *kamang*, who mostly originated as deceased bachelors without any offspring. Both groups of spirit beings were declared *leluhur* by my Ahe informants,²⁵ yet they were thought of as representing another class of ancestors than one's own, direct ancestors.

To summarize, Ahe cosmology displays fewer ancestors than Thomson's indiscriminate use of the term "ancestral spirits" (2000: 65) suggests, but considerably more than Sellato's restriction "that a special rite must be held to install the . . . selected few as ancestors" (2002: 14) admits. The *kamang*, as "bachelors who did not come back," were not installed as ancestors. However, they represent "common" ancestors in Ahe society. Some of the ritually installed "personal" ancestors also became assimilated into this category of "common" ancestors due to a loss of genealogical memory.

Ancestral Comradeship in Anti-Madurese Warfare

After that excursion into Ahe conceptions of ancestors, I now return to the particular historical moment when PMM and his fellow combatants were about to leave the area of Gulong in West Kalimantan to join anti-Madurese fighting in the neighbouring province of Central Kalimantan. As PMM recalls, although there were only a few people with him, they constituted a great number of fighters – judging from the extensive assistance of the various spirit beings which joined in. As PMM had already experienced during his involvement in Dayak–Madurese warfare during the 1990s in West Kalimantan, ritual precautions had to be carried out before leaving for the battlefield. The following account of these rituals is mainly based on my interview data from the area of Gulong in 2004 and 2007. It is complemented by data from some written accounts about conflicts in the area of Pontianak (1996/97) and Sambas (1996/97 and 1999) districts.

Mato': Consulting the Ancestors

Before going to war, an observer from a local NGO in Pontianak states, warriors had to carry out a ritual “called *menyaru' tariu* or *Matok* which causes the so-called ‘warriors’ to be possessed by a number of spirits, after which the person concerned is not conscious of their actions, they do not possess any authority over their body” (sic) (Bamba 1998). Not only is this description lacking in details, more importantly it confuses two crucial points. First, the terms *mato'* and *nyaru' tariu* do not represent a single ritual, but two different rites, closely related to each other but dissimilar in respect of their aims and (sometimes) in respect of the place of ritual performance (see Giring 2004a: 115–123 and Petebang 2005: 46–49). Second, the frequently repeated idea of warriors being “possessed by a number of spirits” is often misleading. In the simplified way in which it is usually put, it obscures one of the most significant elements of ancestral involvement in Dayak–Madurese warfare, namely that of comradeship (e.g., HRW 1997: 15, Suparlan 2001: 52–53).

Being actively involved in the ethnic uprisings in West and Central Kalimantan, PMM has experienced both ritual performances repeatedly. In the morning of 16 February 2001, before his departure to Central Kalimantan, PMM went to the *pantak padagi* of Ne' Rake. This wooden effigy, where Ne' Rake's *pama* is stored, is located at a sacred place called Tembawang Tabale, about half an hour's walking distance from Gulong. The oral history



Figure 6.3. *Mato'* ritual to consult Ne' Rake at Tembawang Tabale, near the village of Gulong.

of the Banyuke region recalls Ne' Rake as a famous warrior, having led some well-remembered revenge attacks against headhunting parties from the area of Sambas until, as people in Gulong report, "a whole village of enemies was finished by him alone, and his *mandau* was sticking to his hands due to the great amount of blood which had been spilt."

At the *pantak* of Ne' Rake, a *mato'* ritual was performed by a ritual specialist who was a direct descendant of the famous warrior (see Figure 6.3). PMM describes this ritual in terms of communication, or information exchange,²⁶ between this officiant and Ne' Rake, whereby the officiant represented the prospective combatants and Ne' Rake also functioned as a messenger to other ancestral spirits and the various *kamang*. He clarifies this process of communication as follows. The living have first to inform the ancestors about the problem at hand, and await their answer – usually indicated by signs of nature, prominently omen birds – which would include information about the right time and appropriate place for an attack (cf. Petebang 2005: 46, Petebang and Sutrisno 2000: 186). At the same time, informed about the target group of the proposed attack, the ancestors

would also assist by weakening the enemies' *sumangat*. This description is congruent with Giring's short account of the same ritual which he calls *batanung mato'* and paraphrases as "bewitching and cursing the enemies" (2004a: 117).²⁷ *Batanung* in Ba'ahe/Kanayatn language ambiguously means 'fortune-telling', on the one hand, and 'cursing by magic spells', on the other. Etymologies of the term *mato'* itself pose some difficulties. The Urakng Mempawah myth of the origin of the *pantak* (Dunselman 1949–50: 62–65) tells about Ne' Do'akng, before his departure to a headhunt:

Ia mato': minta' barayuknga' ba Kamang Nyangko, Kamang Lejak dan Kamang Nyado.

Dunselman translates *mato'* in this context as "bringing an offering," to "ask Kamang Nyangko, Kamang Lejak and Kamang Nyado to accompany him." Accordingly, he later defines *pato'* as an "offering to the spirits of the woods, especially the *Kamang*," by way of which the latter are asked to provide information (via omens, or *rasi*) about the probable outcome of a proposed action (Dunselman 1949–50: 369). It may be noted that *mato'* rites are not exclusively performed in connection with headhunting and warfare, but also, according to my informants, in contexts such as hunting and agriculture (e.g., *mato' tautn*).²⁸ The term *mato'* is probably cognate with Malay *patok*, (*me*)*matok*, meaning 'pole' or 'stake', or 'to delineate/mark' (a geographic area). This meaning perfectly fits another summarizing explanation given by PMM when talking about the *mato'* and its different contexts: *tentukan arah* <BI>, or 'setting the directions' – where and when to go hunting, where to clear forest for new paddy fields, or where and when to start an attack.

Subsequent to this consultation of the ancestors by way of *mato'*, omen birds have to be awaited. These birds communicate the final decision made by the ancestors and associated spirits. This message is spread via the often mentioned *mangkok merah* ('red bowl') to friendly villages, asking them for assistance in war. Notwithstanding local variation in its shape and contents, the *mangkok merah* basically is a bowl smeared with chicken blood, to announce an impending war. It contains various items of symbolic connotation, indicating the time of departure for the battlefield, the number of warriors requested for assistance, etc. (Muslim and Frans Layang 1994, Nungkat 1994, Petebang 2005: 69–74). "Hundreds of red bowls" were said to have been sent from village to village in 1997 in West Kalimantan (SiaR 1997), which was not the case in Central Kalimantan 2001 since people there, following different traditions, would not have understood the symbol.

Nyaru' Tariu: Invoking Ancestral Strength

Immediately before warriors leave for the battlefield, another ritual has to be performed, namely *nyaru' tariu*. In most published accounts the purpose of this ritual is described as “calling the *tariu*, the ancestor spirits of war” (Peluso 2003: 205, cf. Peluso 2006: 112, Petebang 2005: 46–47, Suparlan 2001: 51) and interpreted as to acquire “possession” by these – and/or some other – spirits. As another source puts it, “The ritual mobilized war parties of tens to hundreds, some of whom were said to be in a killing trance, their bodies occupied by the ancestral warrior spirits who controlled their actions” (Harwell 2000: 202).

However, some say that ancestral spirits are called to assist, rather than to possess, the fighters (Giring 2004b: 8, cf. Tiras 1997). In the same way many of the active fighters whom I have interviewed during the last six years do not recall “being possessed” (*dirasuki* <BI>), but rather “being accompanied” (*didampingi* <BI>, sometimes *ditemani* <BI>) by ancestral spirits. The *nyaru' tariu* ritual indeed preludes a kind of “ancestral comradeship” which, beyond possession, is reported to have given extraordinary power to the Dayak combatants in anti-Madurese warfare.

In fact, PMM never depicted *tariu* as the “highest *kamang*” as Schadée (1903–08: 540, cf. footnote 23 above) and others do. Rather he would describe *tariu* as being a certain kind of “force” (the power possessed by the *kamang*) which can be attained by humans via ritual practice. Accordingly *nyaru' tariu* would translate as ‘calling up *tariu* force’. Attributes of this force are said to be invulnerability and a range of magic powers which can be used in warfare.²⁹ PMM states that

... when attacking, we were seen by our enemies and the security forces as a single person, or a small group of people. But in fact we were thousands. All the brave people of former times were backing us. But they were invisible. ... When we were facing a great number of enemies or military we had to *nariu* to lose our fear.

Nariu is a verb derived from *tariu*, which can be translated as ‘uttering the cries of war’.³⁰ Indeed some sources (Nungkat 1994: 97, Petebang 2005: 39) say *tariu* denotes a kind of “scream” or “yell” (*teriakan* <BI>). However, *tariu*

... cannot easily be explained with rhyme or reason. This yell causes people to be hypnotized and to become very brave, even brave enough

to kill or to be killed. Certainly it is more than an average scream, rather a supernatural yelling. . . . *Tariu* constitutes a mystery (Petebang 2005: 39, my translation).

This explanation throws light on PMM's description of *tariu* as a certain kind of force, reaffirmed during warfare by yelling in a distinct manner (*nariu*). According to PMM *tariu* force is attained in two subsequent stages. *Tariu* has first to be initiated in the warriors' body by the ritual *nyaru' tariu*, which is performed immediately prior to departure for the battlefield. The ritual is performed at the *pantak padagi*, usually before noon, when the sun is still ascending. All the *pantak* of former *urakng barani* have to be fitted out with a new set of red clothes, including new red headbands. Attendants of the ritual dress up similarly, so as to be recognized by the *urakng barani* and the *kamang* as prospective fighting comrades. The invocation starts with clanking two pieces of iron and scattering yellow rice (*baras ijo*) to invite the spirits. Then the main mediator, in this case Ne' Rake, is addressed by lengthy prayers (*sangahatn*), requesting strength and power to face the dangers ahead, and asking him to invite the *kamang* to join. From time to time, the ritual specialist (*panyangahatn*) leading the ceremony, faces the other *pantak*, addressing one after another the various *urakng barani* in a similar way, but more briefly. A red chicken and a red dog are sacrificed. By the flow of blood, the *tariu* force, which "is associated with the *kamang*" (*ada pada kamang* <BI>) is finally set free to condition the bodies of the prospective fighters who are present at the ritual location. Both groups, the human combatants and the ancestral fighters (*urakng barani* and *kamang*), now fully recognize each other as companions and depart for the battlefields.

The ritual sequences described above show the slight but important difference between "possession," in the sense of being temporarily displaced or inhabited by a particular spirit, and this form of "conditionment" by the *tariu*. The mind of the fighters is altered and one of their souls, *sumangat*, replaced by *tariu* force which connects them closely to an otherworldly realm, namely that of the ancestors. When facing the enemy, *tariu* has to be 'built up' (*bangun tariu*) again and again through *nariu* 'war yelling', reaffirming the previously initiated comradeship of ancestral spirits and present-day fighters. This "army of invisibles"³¹ is known as *bala tariu* or, sometimes, as *bala saribu* ("the troop of thousands," indicating the large number of invoked spirit comrades). According to PMM it includes all of the previously invoked 'brave people' (*urakng barani*): the



Figure 6.4. Madurese skulls, presented to a *pantak* in West Kalimantan, 1999.

multitude of *kamang*, and the ancestor warriors whose *pama* is “stored” in *pantak*.

After completed war action, rituals are held again at the *pantak padagi*, now to dispel the *tariu* from the fighters’ bodies (*pulangkatn tariu*) and call back their *sumangat* (*nyaru’ sumangat*). It is reported that in former days, the fighters “after a warlike expedition c[a]me here [i.e., to the *pantak*] with the heads they . . . captured [to] perform the first solemnities” (Pfeiffer 1855: I, 136). However, according to my informants, in the 1990s captured Madurese heads were first hidden at some secret place after the conflicts and only later ritually consecrated during *notokng* rituals (cf. Ngiuk 2003). The skulls were then presented at the *pantak* to the ancestor comrades as a reward for their assistance during warfare (see Figure 6.4).³²

As stated earlier, headhunting was not the aim of anti-Madurese warfare. However, ritual obligations widely necessitated the taking of heads. Although some observers deny that *notokng* rituals have been performed in connection with anti-Madurese warfare (Bamba 1998, Giring 2004a: 131), many of my informants stressed that they indeed had taken place and even provided me with photographs of the rituals.

Epilogue: *Leluhur Dayak*

The appearance of West Kalimantan ancestors as “comrades” in the conflicts in neighbouring Central Kalimantan in 2001 has added a new dimension to the issue of Dayak ancestorship. As some accounts on Kalimantan ethnic conflicts clearly show, the “Dayak–Madurese war” has contributed to a transformation of the social reality in present-day Kalimantan, especially regarding notions of identity and ethnic consciousness. An idea of “pan-Dayak” ancestors is on the rise, emerging in two different ways. On the one hand, beliefs in the ancestral origin of magical powers have been used by local elites in order to produce a “pan-Dayak” community. Notions of *leluhur Dayak* <BI> or *nenek moyang Dayak* <BI> (‘Dayak ancestors’) featured frequently in these efforts. Concomitantly, a growing sense of shared “mythological unity” among Dayaks can be noted at the grassroots level. Ethnic conflict, especially in Central Kalimantan, provided an opportunity for many villagers from distant parts of the island to meet and to exchange ideas about “ancestral magic” when preparing for battle. First impacts of this are becoming visible. Back in 2003, I interviewed a combatant of the Kahayan minority group dwelling in Tering, East Kalimantan, with some family ties to the original Bahau group there. When fighting in Sampit 2001, he had been given the title *Panglima Berat Bumi* (‘War Leader of the Heavy Earth’, hereafter PBB). He produced some handwritten notes from his time in Central Kalimantan. I was quite surprised to find included an account about ritual liturgies on “how to call the *kamang*.” Questioned about it, he replied that

Nowadays, Dayak people perceive themselves as brothers and sisters, regardless from which area you are. . . . We help one another. The spirits and the ancestors also recognize it. We can learn from each other. People here in Tering just know about their ancestors and traditions back home at the Kahayan river, and here we have come to know some practices from the Bahau people. But all of us are Dayak, so we should learn from each other about *all* Dayak ancestors [*leluhur*] and *all* Dayak magic. That is our strength. Otherwise we will not have a chance to survive the threats from the outside [my translation from the Indonesian].

This suggests that the *kamang*, whom I have labelled “common” or “mythological” ancestors in Ahe society, have become a common asset far beyond the area of Banyuke. This would, however, not be true for Ahe “personal” or

“historical” ancestors. During my interviews in Tering, PBB stated that one could not possibly take over somebody else’s (personal) ancestors (*nenek moyang orang lain* <BI>). Sure enough, he added, in Sampit he had his own personal ancestors to invoke, which were provided by the Bahau line of his family. Their names were written down in his notes under the heading *Hipui Tering Lama* (“aristocrats of Old Tering”). These personal ancestors included Meto’ Bo’ Ding Luhung, Meto’ Bo’ Madang Ibau and Meto’ Bo’ Turung Tukau, who are legendary heroes of the middle Mahakam area in East Kalimantan. If Sellato is right in assuming that “among the Kayanic groups . . . the spirit of the dead is never invoked or given offerings” (Sellato 2002: 9), the invocation of these heroes during the anti-Madurese war might be an “invention” inspired by contact with other combatants from West Kalimantan.

Other accounts of the Dayak–Madurese conflicts in recent years have shown that it brought in its wake substantial changes to the political environment of contemporary Kalimantan, most strikingly the rising importance of ethnic elites in local politics (Davidson 2003, van Klinken 2002). From a different perspective, this chapter has shown that anti-Madurese warfare also resulted in a revival of cosmological conceptions and ritual practices, which, dormant for several decades, might soon have become extinct from the socio-cultural repertoire of contemporary Dayak societies. These conceptions and practices were not only revived but also renegotiated in the course of events. Below I recapitulate the main effects of the Dayak–Madurese conflict on Dayak notions of ancestors.

(I) A shift towards a political rhetoric of “Dayak ancestors” (*leluhur Dayak*), whereby local elites have exploited the importance traditionally attached to ancestors in various Dayak societies in order to build and strengthen a sense of a pan-Dayak community. This rhetoric involves vague concepts of “ancestors,” “ancestral homelands” which have to be defended, “ancestral magic” used to defend them, and “ancestral spirits” which enter the contemporary political arena by means of “possession.”

(II) An “exchange of ancestors,” and ritual practices to invoke them, between geographically distant Dayak groups. This includes the case of West Kalimantan Ahe Dayaks (and their ancestor comrades) fighting in the neighbouring province of Central Kalimantan against a common enemy, but also the “export” of a certain class of ancestors, the *kamang*, to yet another province, East Kalimantan, where they have started to influence local cosmologies.

(III) A fabrication of new ancestors. Sellato (2002: 16) has envisioned the possibility that the Aoheng of central Borneo, who traditionally did not revere their ancestors, might in the future start “focusing their ethnocultural identity on some famous chief of old, unconsciously installing him as an ancestor and at the same time starting a cult on him.” As I have suggested in respect to the case of *Panglima Berat Bumi*, personal forebears who had presumably not been the object of ritual attention in the past appear to have been enrolled as spiritual combatants by Dayaks fighting Madurese in Central Kalimantan.

Notes

1 My interview materials include notes and audio recordings of more than a hundred focused group discussions and personal interviews, as well as accounts of occasional conversations during ten different periods of fieldwork among various ethnic groups of East and West Kalimantan between 2001 and 2007, which together add up to a total of more than three years. Additionally, I have been in contact via telephone and email with many interviewees during intervening stays in Europe. The Ahe Dayak of West Kalimantan were visited in June–July 2003 and again in May–June 2007.

2 In addition to some scattered media reports there are a few academic theses, unpublished reports, and autobiographical writings which include some account of the events, e.g., Alqadrie (1990), van Hulten (1983), Nungkat (1994), Roekaerts (1985), and Sudagung (1984).

3 Most of the writings about anti-Madurese violence in the 1990s and 2001 mention some of these cases, usually dismissing them as “minor incidents.” For a more comprehensive listing, including 50+ incidents, see Oesterheld (2004: App.1).

4 <BI>, short for *Bahasa Indonesia*, marks Indonesian expressions in this chapter; expressions from local languages are marked separately.

5 It should be noted that similar fear of a “Madurese plot” was discussed during the Sambas riots of 1999. If in 2001 evidence was quoted that “the Madurese” wanted Sampit to become “Sampang ke-II” (the “second Sampang,” after a town of the same name in Madura island), in 1999 documents had been revealed which contained plans to make the whole district of Sambas “the second Madura” (see Petebang and Sutrisno 2000: 45).

6 This letter, signed “Posko Manjaga Karasih Petak Danum Kalimantan Tengah” and dated “April 16, 2001,” had been placed at the Internet (<http://www.digitalium.co.jp/suwido/>); the link was dead by last check in June 2007. The original English of the document has not been corrected here.

7 Eriyanto et al. (2004: 101–122) provide a good summary of reports of magic in local newspapers (especially *Banjarmasin Post*, *Kalteng Pos* and *Bebas*) during March and April 2001; a collection of nationwide newspaper articles (especially *Kompas*, *Media Indonesia*, *Suara Pembaruan* and *Tempo*) has been compiled by Edi Petebang (2001).

8 K. M. A. Usop, a Dayak professor at Palangka Raya University, cited in “Inside the head of a headhunter,” reported for CNN by Kirsty Alfredson (part of the CNN.com “In-Depth Special” *Kalimantan’s Agony: The Failure of Transmigrasi*).

9 Hermann Stahlhacke (catholic priest in Muara Teweh), personal communication, Samarinda 2005.

10 On the “flying mandau” see Wijaya (2002), or articles in *Kalteng Pos*, 30 and 31 March 2001.

11 General statements of that sort can also be found in a report of the International Crisis Group (ICG 2001: 6), or in a series of unpublished letters by Thomas Brönnimann, a Swiss expatriate in Palangka Raya, addressed “to friends and family in Europe” (Brönnimann 2001).

12 E.g., Fridolin Ukur in an interview (see *Tempo* 2001), or remarks in the ICG report (2001: 6); a vast range of mass media accounts stress the topic of ancestral possession also, as did several (non-Dayak) locals during my interviews 2001–2007. For similar accounts on Dayak–Madurese violence in the 1990s West Kalimantan see, e.g., Bamba (1998), Harwell (2000: 212), Peluso (2003: 205 and 2006: 119), Schiller and Garang (2002: 246, 251).

13 One of the fighting companions of the West Kalimantan *Panglima Burung* was called *Antang* (Frans Layang 1981: 52), apparently without any connection with the Central Kalimantan omen bird.

14 *Intel* is the abbreviation for the Indonesian Intelligence Service.

15 Cf. *Daftar kronologis terjadinya tindakan kekerasan/kejahatan etnis MADURA terhadap suku Dayak warga Kalimantan Tengah*, in LMMDD-KT (2001). Several of my interview partners from Central Kalimantan affirmed this story.

16 Most remarkable were clashes in the market area of Sampit in early March 1998 (see APP 2001), several small-scale riots at the port of Kumai, January 1999 (ICG 2001: 3 and van Klinken 2002) and again July/August 2000, or unrest in Tumbang Samba, in September 1999.

17 In published sources this case is widely seen as the main trigger of the large-scale anti-Madurese riots in Central Kalimantan in 2001.

18 As Thomson adds later, the *jubata* might dwell in a variety of other “physically prominent or impressive” places as well: “particularly large or unusual trees, dense forests and fields cleared in the forest, river banks, particularly [deep] bends in a

river, caves, paths, forks in paths, entrances to villages, and the inside peak of a longhouse roof" (2000: 65–66). Schadée (1903–08: 523) has them populating also the sun, moon, and stars.

19 In a similar way *pama* is also attached to various heirlooms like precious weapons or jars (cf. Stöhr 1959: 138).

20 For early mentions of these *pantak* see Francis (1841: 10), Kühr (1896–97: 74) and Pfeiffer (1855: I, 136). More detailed recent accounts are given by Bahari Sinju (1993 and 1997).

21 Other accounts of the Kanayatn classification of ancestral effigies stress that wooden statues for ritual specialists are not called *pantak* but *ampago*. The statues' shape differs slightly: whereas *pantak* effigies have their arms and hands reaching out, the arms of *ampago* statues are lowered towards the ground (see KR 1998).

22 A similar notion underlies Stutterheim's (1931: 7) interpretation, according to which the "soul of the deceased is absorbed by . . . Kemang Trio."

23 This idea was first posited by Schadée (1903–08: 540) and became standardized due to its reiteration by Yermias (1997: 9) and was subsequently frequently referred to in academic accounts (e.g., Petebang 2005, or Peluso 2003). A similar notion, with most of the 'seven siblings' given other names, was spread by local mass media during the time of anti-Madurese uprisings in West Kalimantan 1997; see, e.g., SiaR (1997) or Suaka (1999).

24 See also McDougall (1854: 49–50) and Morris (1905: 166–67). For general mention of *kamang* and *tariu* (sometimes also spelled *komang*, *triu* and *trio*) see Beccari (1904: 62) and St. John (1863: 241); for more recent accounts from Sarawak Nais (1988) or Niagara (2005–06, part XIV–116).

25 See also Schadée (1903–08: 540), who describes *Bujakng Nyangko* as the ancestor of Menyuke chiefs.

26 Using the Indonesian expressions *cari tahu* (seeking information) and *memberi tahu* (giving information).

27 My translation from the Indonesian. Giring writes "*menenung dan menyumpah' lawan perang*."

28 Descriptions in some sources indicate that *mato* rituals are required to precede all significant rituals. They have to be performed prior to the main rituals of the West Kalimantan "Thanksgiving" (*Naik Dango*, or *Gawai*), "to inform the *jubata* and ask for their blessings" (Ivo 2001: 293), or more generally "before undertaking activities of any significance . . . to make arrangements with *Jubata* and the spirits, to let them know what is happening and to ensure that they have their share of involvement" (Thomson 2000: 108).

29 It is interesting to note that in Bidayuh mythology similar magical powers have been handed down, in the form of four charms, by a *kamang* to Bai Pangol, a legendary Bidayuh hero (see Nais 1988: 49–50, Niagara 2006).

30 In a similar way Giring (2003) has paraphrased the moment of yelling as *bangun teriu*, “waking up/building up tariu.”

31 This topic is rarely mentioned in non-indigenous representations of Dayak–Madurese violence. However, Louise Williams reported that “some say the attackers were spirits, raised from the dead” (see “War of the jungle: blood savagery or a heroic fightback?,” *Sydney Morning Herald* 22 February 1997).

32 Despite their strict denial of “traditional” headhunting being part of Dayak–Madurese violence, Peluso and Harwell relate (for West Kalimantan) that “many heads apparently were sent to two villages where local experts apparently still knew how to ritually treat them, as was customary under the ‘traditional’ practice of headhunting” (2001: 89, fn. 16). Similarly, Smith reports for Central Kalimantan, that “in some villages, special ceremonies were also held whereby Madurese heads were stored in *patahu*, small spirit houses” (2005: 20).

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CHAPTER 7

Agency and Ambiguity in Communication with the Ancestors: Spirit Possession, Ancestral Transformation, and the Conflicts of Modernity among the Benuaq

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THE BENUAQ ARE A GROUP of Luangan Dayaks (Weinstock 1983) who live in the ten southernmost sub-districts (*kecamatan*) of West Kutai district in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, and can be further divided into three main dialects (Idaahn, Ohokng, and Nyuwataahn), and several other sub-dialects, including the Kinokng, Lawa, and Bongan.¹ In language, ritual practice, cosmological beliefs, and cultural history the Benuaq are very closely related to and overlap with the Bentian (Sillander, this volume). In both Bentian and Benuaq ritual practice a detailed cosmology and an elaborate pantheon of spirits are called upon in ritual and also in daily life, and these spirits interact with the living in a variety of ritual contexts. Spirits are thought to be both human and non-human in origin, and frequently fall into categories that blur the boundaries between ancestral and non-ancestral.

This chapter examines how spirit possession serves as a means of communication between Benuaq ancestors and the living, by analyzing three different categories of ancestral possession. Understanding ancestral possession as an avenue of communication allows for an analysis that moves beyond viewing spirit possession as a functionalist resolution of a “sex war” drama between subordinate women and dominant men, as exemplified by I. M. Lewis (2003). Possession in its multiple forms serves as an embodiment of the Benuaq past – of both mythological history and the more recent genealogical past – in the living, and can also express, and sometimes resolve, specific problems in Benuaq society, including illness and community well-being, the reproduction of ritual knowledge, and problems of community identity with the changes of modernity. As Lambek (2002) found in Mahajanga, Madagascar, ancestor spirits actively intervene in the history of their

descendants, although for the Benuaq such active influence on the living is the exception rather than the rule. But on the rare occasions when Benuaq ancestors do actively possess the living against their will, certain conflicts between the individual, community, and history come to light. There have been a number of well-known debates about the meanings and functions of spirit possession (cf. Boddy 1989, Bourguignon 2004, Lewis 2003), but most of these studies assume that what is at stake in spirit possession are the possessed individual's personal motives and interests. Where this study departs from those earlier debates is in my attempt to demonstrate that in active, spontaneous possession, the individual's motives and desires are often completely beside the point. The issues and problems that are made manifest are not so much those of the individual as questions faced by the larger community which are expressed through the possessed individual.

The first section of this chapter describes the ancestral spirits that play the most important roles in Benuaq ritual and daily life. These spirits have a complex relationship of ancestry with living humans, for they are not all ancestral in exactly the same fashion: some are distant, mythological founding spirits, some recent genealogical ancestors, and many lie somewhere in between. The following sections explore communication between humans and ancestral spirits as mediated through the act of spirit possession, which takes a variety of different forms depending on the ritual context. While Vincent Crapanzano has defined spirit possession as necessarily involving altered states of consciousness (1977: 7–8), this is not always the case in Benuaq ritual, where a kind of formalized possession is commonly practiced. This kind of possession can be a very ordinary affair, not much different than reciting the lines of a play, yet it is still considered to be possession. Examples of formalized possession abound in which the agency of ancestral spirits works through ritual specialists to confer blessings and good fortune on the living. Communication with the ancestors in these cases is passive, and is mostly concerned with an exchange between the living and the spirits that creates and reproduces a moral relationship between the present and the ancestral past.

The remaining part of the chapter focuses on examples of more active ancestral possession, beginning with the case of a young girl whose possession by her immediate ancestors was induced as part of a ritual to cure her of several psychological problems. While controlled possession with the ancestors worked in that case to resolve the sick girl's problems, the remaining cases present more ambiguous examples. I present two cases of spontaneous

possession that highlighted certain tensions within the Benuaq communities in which they took place. In the first example, a woman who was the descendant of prominent shamans was possessed seemingly at random during a curing ritual. This was interpreted as a sign that the spirits wanted her to continue the shamanist profession – a desire she did not share. This case exposed specific conflicts between shamanist tradition and modernity that are increasingly common in most Benuaq communities, and that, as in this example, frequently go unresolved. The second case of the direct ancestral possession of a young girl resulted in a curing ritual that transformed the status of the possessing ancestor – demonstrating that ancestral identities are not necessarily fixed but can also be transformed. But in the process of carrying out the ritual to meet the ancestor's demands to be made into a kind of protector spirit of the village, social rifts within the village were also explicitly brought to the surface that were also unresolved and, to an extent, irresolvable. This case also motivates me to re-examine Sellato's (2002) model of ancestor status formation and to modify it to account for the ethnographic details of the Benuaq case.

Spirits, Ancestors, and the Mythological History of Benuaq Society

I will begin by reviewing some of the major categories of Benuaq spirit cosmology and their complex and sometimes uncertain relationship to living humans. As with the Bentian (Sillander, this volume), the ancestors of the Benuaq are generally regarded as the source of most human knowledge, especially of traditional agricultural practices, of curing techniques, and of customary law (Sillander 2004: 216). But unlike in some Borneo societies where ancestral spirits are a loose and poorly defined group (cf. Sellato 2002), Benuaq ancestral spirits comprise several distinct groups that have varying degrees of relationship to humans. One is that of the earliest humans, a group of mythological culture heroes descended from the first people, Tamarikukng and his wife Ayaakng Uyukng, and which includes a number of spirit-people who are called upon in most Benuaq curing and life-cycle rituals. These include Siluq, who lives in the ocean and has the power to cure lingering illnesses, and who is called upon in *beliatn* curing rituals; Ayus, who along with Siluq first constructed the heavens and earth (Hopes et al. 1997: 24); and most importantly Kilip. The son of Datu and Dara, Kilip is the primary Benuaq culture hero and one of the mythological

founders of Benuaq tradition, known as the ‘father of knowledge’ (*taman tauq*). These spirit-people are said to have their geographical point of origin in eastern Central Kalimantan (a region also locally considered to be the historical origin place of the Benuaq people), and they are believed to be the originators of much that exists in the current world. Thus Kilip is credited with introducing mortuary ritual and other ritual acts to Benuaq society; with the creation of the first longhouses; and with playing a role in either the creation or the introduction of such things commonly used in ritual as bamboo and incense. Kilip and many of these other mythological figures play an essential part in Benuaq ritual and are invoked whenever origin myths (*tempuutn*) are recited. These spirit-people are not the genealogical ancestors of any particular currently living person, or even lineage of people, but in their capacity as “remarkable people” of the past they could be said to be ancestral to many of the important Benuaq institutions.

In addition to these mythological people, who have well-defined, individual identities, there are several classes of spirits who can have individual identities but who also exist as multiple, undifferentiated members of a single category. In mythological history these spirits and humans have an intertwined genealogical relationship with each other. At the apex of this spirit world is Pejadiq, ‘The Maker’, who is roughly equivalent to God in monotheistic theology, but who plays a distant, largely passive role in Benuaq cosmology. Pejadiq, who is a member of the class of spirits called *seniang*, first created the sun, the moon, and the stars, all of which are also classified as *seniang* spirits (*seniang olo*, *seniang bulaatn*, and *seniang bintaakng* respectively). Pejadiq also created the first humans, Tamarikukng and his wife, who in addition to their human offspring also begot the eight *seniang* spirits (the *seniang walo*) who play a significant role in Benuaq ritual. The eight *seniang* gave birth in turn to some of the first *nayuq*, a class of powerful protector spirits (Madrah 2001: 16–17). Tamarikukng and his wife also had a number of additional *seniang* children who were the ancestors of other *nayuq* spirits, along with the *tonoi* earth spirits who were the original bearers of fire; the *juata* water spirits who are the ancestors of fish; and the *nyahuq* omen spirits (Hopes et al. 1997: 36–37, 71–72). Many other *nayuq* spirits were created directly by Ayus and Siluq at the time that they made the earth (Hopes 1997a: 27–28). Eventually a *nayuq* spirit married a *juata* water spirit, and their human son Datu became the father of Kilip, the mythological ‘father of knowledge’ and Benuaq culture hero (Hopes et al. 1997: 87). This abbreviated genealogy is meant to illustrate the ancestral

interweaving between the earliest humans and some of the most important spirits in Benuaq cosmology, where spirits have begotten humans who are then the ancestors of other classes of spirits. This is hardly an exhaustive list of the Benuaq spirit world. Among the more important spirits that I do not discuss here are Jariq, the taboo spirit who is another offspring of Tamarikung and is, like Kilip and many of the other spirits discussed here, considered to be human (*senarikng*), only not visible (*gaib*, *béau ditaatn*); and the rice spirit Luikng.²

Except for those original *nayuy* who were born from other spirits, most *nayuy* are the spirits of dead humans who have become protector spirits (*tangai*) of the living. They live above the sky and also in the ghostly remains of old longhouses (*puncutn lou*) that have long ago collapsed and disappeared from the visible landscape. According to Massing the *nayuy* are “the souls of former warrior-heroes, headhunters, and magicians who became immortal and endowed with magic powers” (Massing 1982: 62), a characterization we will see evidence for later in this chapter. *Nayuy* are said to be responsible for the health and physical and material well being of the living and their crops, and also play a significant role in healing the sick during *beliatn* curing rituals. But while they are capable of bestowing blessings, the *nayuy* are also thought to possess more dangerous qualities; like the similar *naiyu* of the Bentian, a “principle property [of the *nayuy*] . . . is their desire for blood, and it is the practice of anointing the ancestral objects with this substance which is said to be what attracts [them]” (Sillander 2004: 221). The *nayuy* are thus symbolically associated with the color red. They are also quick to anger if they are not given the proper offerings or if their individual names are spoken out of place. When recording Benuaq rituals, ritual practitioners often asked me to stop recording when they began to call the names of the *nayuy* – they were afraid of angering the *nayuy*, as their names should not be spoken without the appropriate ritual offerings and paraphernalia being present.³ If angered it is believed that the *nayuy* can make people sick. All of these characteristics are important qualities of ancestral spirits generally among the Benuaq: they are capable of bestowing blessings upon the living and act as arbiters of morality, but are also capricious and potentially dangerous if not treated properly (cf. Graeber 1995: 258–259, Lambek 2002).

This brings us to the two most important categories of ancestral spirits that have not yet been mentioned, but which have the most immediate genealogical relationship to living humans, the *liau* and *kelelungan*. These are the souls of deceased people. Both come into existence after a person

dies and their living soul (*juus*) is transformed into them. This process of transformation has already been described in detail elsewhere (Weinstock 1983, Sillander, this volume), with the most common explanation for the appearance of the *liau* and *kelelungan* after death being that the living soul bifurcates into these two entities, the *liau* representing the more carnal aspect of human nature and the *kelelungan* representing the moral and intellectual side. There is some disagreement in the literature as to how the living soul splits into two parts after death (Sillander 2004: 180, fn. 118). What is important here is to note their characteristics as the main Benuaq ancestor spirits.

The *liau* are the spirits of the body and the passions, and are said to be 'hot' and their character is seen as mischievous at best, dangerous at worst. At the beginning of most ritual activities there is an act of sending away any *liau* spirits who might be lingering around the area in order to ensure that these spirits do not interfere with events by intentionally inciting people's passions and causing them to fight.⁴ The *liau* are also characterized as being somewhat childlike and envious, and during mortuary rituals there are a number of different games (*riék liau*) played specifically to entertain and to placate the feelings of these spirits. During secondary mortuary rituals (*kuangkai*) the *liau* of people's ancestors are invited to attend along with the *kelelungan*, but because they are considered 'hot' and therefore potentially dangerous, they are kept outside of the house on a special platform (*sekuatn*) until the final day of the ritual.⁵

The *kelelungan* are the spirits of the mind and intellect, and unlike the *liau* are capable of bestowing their blessings on the living. This is done in several different contexts, including *beliatn* curing rituals where they are called upon to bring medicine to the sick, and whenever ancestral blessings are thought to be necessary, from departing on a long journey to conducting a wedding. In many cases the direct ancestors of the people in question will be called down by name to offer their blessings, along with the older *kelelungan* spirits (*kelelungan ro* or *kelelungan nahaaq*).

Most of these spirits – the *nayuq*, *juata*, *tonoi*, and *kelelungan* – can be classified together under the category of protector spirits who travel with humans when called upon to assist them. The Benuaq name for this category is *pengngirikng*; this name is a compound of the personifying prefix *peng-* and the verb *ngirikng*, which means to simultaneously accompany and assist someone. Thus the *pengngirikng* are literally the 'ones who travel with and give help to' the living. The *pengngirikng* serve as spirit protectors for *beliatn*

shamans, but can also be called upon by non-ritual specialists: if someone is going on a long journey, for example, *pengngirikng* are called upon to offer protection against danger. Although these spirits protect the living, they can also become angry with the living if people are dishonest, or if various social codes are broken, for example showing respect towards one's elders. If this code is broken, the resulting punishment, called *buncukng*, is imposed by the *pengngirikng*. Thus the *pengngirikng* are collectively seen as important arbiters of human morality in addition to being guardians of good fortune.⁶

We have seen from the previous discussion that the spirits of the Benuaq world exist in a gradient from being more to less ancestral in nature – and it should be noted that the list of spirits discussed here is a simplified version of a much more complex cosmological order, the full scope of which is beyond the bounds of this chapter. (For example the *mulukng* are an important class of guardian spirits, but they largely take the form of animals and only partly consist of ancestral spirits.) What then counts as an ancestral, as opposed to other kind of spirit? Among the Benuaq there is no word that neatly corresponds to the English word for “ancestor” (cf. Kopytoff 1971 for Africa, Sellato 2002 for Borneo). And as the preceding discussion has shown, the division between ancestral and non-ancestral spirits is for the Benuaq not always clear-cut. Some spirits, such as the *liau* and *kelelungan*, are unambiguously ancestral, as they are directly connected to deceased human beings. Others such as the *seniang* are ancestral in the sense that it was a *seniang* that created the first people, but are otherwise only very distantly related to humans. Some are mythological ancestors like Kilip, the ‘father of knowledge’; and then there are the *nayuuq* spirits, who appear to fall somewhere in between ancestral and non-ancestral, depending on which particular *nayuuq* is in question.

Speaking of the norms of reciprocity between the living and the spirits of ancestors, Chambert-Loir and Reid provide one of the most detailed definitions of what constitutes an ancestor in Indonesia that can be used to illuminate the different categories of the Benuaq spirit world:

Ancestors are by definition benevolent: they protect their descendants, they guarantee their prosperity and guide them in all important actions in life, on condition that they are honored and fed. If the living neglect their duties towards the ancestors, the latter will punish them by inflicting all kinds of calamities: illnesses, bad crops, accidents. *This reciprocal relationship is not apparently governed by any moral considerations.*

Ancestors do not punish offences against any overarching ethical code; they seek retribution for any lack of proper attention to themselves (Chambert-Loir and Reid 2002: xxi; emphasis added).

To the extent that the *seniang*, *nayug*, and *kelelungan* are benevolent, and that they look after the living unless they are neglected or disrespected, these spirits would all seem to qualify as ancestral under this definition, while the *liau* would not. But to what extent do these spirits all act to enforce a moral code? It seems that the more distantly ancestral they are, the more likely it is that they act as moral enforcers. For the *seniang*, who are only distantly ancestral, the function of social enforcer is clearly predominant; the *seniang* of the sun and moon (*seniang olo bulaatn*), for example, are commonly likened to the police – as spirits who protect the living but who will also punish the living if they are caught doing something wrong (incest is a favorite hypothetical example). The *seniang galékng golokng*, who has no hands or feet, also fulfills this function: if people violate a rule of the *adat* social code this spirit will report to *seniang olo bulaatn* and order them to shine a ‘beam of heat’ on the person or people who have committed the transgression. The *nayug* fulfill a similar position, and indeed people commonly speak of the *nayug seniang* as a single group. Yet it would be misleading to argue that the inescapably ancestral *kelelungan* spirits “do not punish offences against any overarching moral code,” although this is not primarily what they do. *Kelelungan* (and to some extent even *liau*) are believed to enforce the social code of respect for one’s elders, and to inflict the punishment of *buncukng* for transgressing this code, as well as for other transgressions, as the following example will illustrate.

The owner of the house I lived in, an elder respected for his knowledge and adjudication of Benuaq *adat*, returned from a wedding in a distant village and told the story of a young man who boasted at the wedding that he knew more about *adat* than his elders. The man who told this story registered his disapproval of the young man’s words by saying that it was not good to speak that way, and that he would be afraid to do so because “if there were *liau kelelungan* [i.e., ancestor spirits] present, they would be angry” – meaning of course, that both these spirits would be certain to punish such a violation of the moral order. While the *liau* are definitely not *pengngirikng* protector spirits, in their capacity as (genealogical) ancestors they are considered as potential arbiters of human morality.

Beyond the spirits already discussed there are many others that are unrelated to humans and are thus not ancestral; but of the main spirit categories there exists a gradient between more and less ancestral, rather than a clear division between the two. While this goes against some of the literature for Southeast Asia and elsewhere on the subject (see below for a more general discussion of this), this indeterminacy should not necessarily come as a surprise. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia the definition of ancestral spirits is inexact, and as Cannell argues for the people of Bicol in the Philippines, “one part of that inexactitude is precisely that the dividing line between ancestors and high spirits/minor gods is blurred or non-existent” (Cannell 1999: 126). And even in a society like Japan where a distinct word for “ancestor” exists, the spirits that count as ancestral and those which do not are still very indistinct in everyday discourse (Smith 1974).⁷

Controlled and Uncontrolled Interaction with the Ancestors: Forms of Spirit Possession in Benuaq Religion

For the Benuaq, the invocation of ancestral spirits happens in a number of different contexts, especially where the blessing of the living and the healing of the sick is required. Appeals to the spirits for these reasons are usually done in a formalized manner within the bounds of ritual practice and in ways that do not produce altered states of consciousness for the ritual's participants. But on occasion interaction with the ancestors leads to spirit possession, and it is these exceptional cases and their consequences that I will examine in this chapter. Lewis (2003) defines possession as covering relations with spirits that both cause altered states of consciousness and also non-trance states without altered consciousness, a stance that has been criticized as lacking in analytical clarity for its broadness (Appell and Appell 1993: 5). Yet Lewis's stance is not too different from how the Benuaq talk about spirit possession. Despite its vagueness, Lewis's definition is appropriate for the Benuaq case to the extent that, for the Benuaq, there is a spectrum of states of consciousness that exist which count as variations within the broader category of possession (*senuan*). To begin with, I observed nothing like a so-called “possession cult” among patients and practitioners of *beliatn* shamanism (cf. Boddy 1989, Lewis 2003) or anything resembling spirit-mediumship, where either the patient or the medium goes into a trance state to speak with the voices of the spirits as part of the technique of curing.⁸ Nor does possession take the form of an overt, spoken dialogue

between patient and healer of the type commonly found in Malaysian *main puteri* séances (Firth 1967b).

Yet certain types of possession are central to Benuaq ritual in general and *beliatn* shamanism in particular. Possession plays an important part in becoming a shaman (*pemeliatn*) during the initiation ritual called *tumaakng*, when the spirit familiar is supposed to enter the body of an apprentice shaman prior to the teacher's bestowal of a title (*perencaatn*) on the student. During this rite of passage the student loses consciousness (or at least pretends to) while dancing in a possessed state, usually at the time that an animal sacrifice is made.⁹ This is a variation on the globally common pattern for becoming a shaman, in which the initiate is possessed and becomes sick, often with a combination of mental and physical symptoms, but then recovers with the ability to perform ritual acts of healing (Eliade 1964: 33–35). Lewis agrees that “all shamans seem to have experienced something of this initial trauma” (2003: 50).¹⁰ While this pattern appears to be common elsewhere in Kalimantan (cf. Bernstein 1993: 178 for Taman shamans of West Kalimantan) it is rather exceptional for the Benuaq. Becoming a Benuaq shaman is usually a conscious choice (cf. Appell and Appell 1993 for the Rungus of Sabah), even though ordinary people can be possessed by a spirit that leads them to create a novel kind of *beliatn* ritual.¹¹ But once such initial possession that leads to a ritual innovation takes place, the subsequent students learn the *beliatn* through a prescribed course of study and apprenticeship with a teacher, called *tutus-turé*; no future student is expected to become temporarily insane as a prerequisite for becoming a shaman, although this does occasionally happen as well.¹² The important point here is that the spirit possession that happens during a shaman's initiation, if it happens at all, is usually mild and/or affected in quality.

A wide spectrum of different kinds of “possession” also occurs at different times during ritual practice. One of the most common is when a ritual specialist performs the *paper*, an act of ritual cleansing where the specialist fans a person or object with eight *aper* leaves while speaking a blessing and invoking the pantheon of spirits. During this ritual act the specialist performing it displays no signs of altered consciousness or behavior, yet they will claim that it is Kilip and other important spirits, and not the ritual specialist, who actually performs the *paper*. Their argument is that it is the agency of the spirits possessing them during the act, and not their own actions, that imparts ritual efficacy to this act. A similar argument is made during certain shamanistic rituals (most commonly for the *beliatn sentiu*

and the *beliatn bawo*) for the agency of possessing spirits. In these rituals there is a point when the spirit familiars enter into the body of the shaman, who then wildly spins in circles as the gong and drum music (*tétet*) becomes more and more frenetic. This is the *sakau*, often the most dramatic part of a *beliatn*. At the climax of this the shaman, still in a frenzied state, lowers himself over his now-prone patient to *nyegok*, literally suck the illness out of the patient's skin. However, shamans say that it is not actually themselves who perform that healing act but the spirits who have entered their body.¹³ One shaman told me that in the *beliatn bawo* it is not the person who does the actual *nyegok* but the *mujaat*, a kind of ghost that lives in graveyards and is called to the door of the house during the ritual.¹⁴

In all of the above examples, ritual specialists claimed that they were possessed, at least technically, when they carried out those acts, even though they also admitted that they were not in any altered state of consciousness. For the Benuaq the word for possession, *senuan*, is used to cover a wide range of states, including those that do not involve a loss of consciousness in an individual. To give one further example, a mortuary singer (*pengewara*) once described to me how it was formerly common for the mortuary singers to climb a tree called an *engkuni liau*, an actual dead tree erected in front of a house during a mortuary ritual as a kind of game for the *liau* ancestor spirits; in the recent past mortuary singers were asked to climb these trees during the final part of a mortuary ritual (*engkuni liau* are still put up, but now it is mostly general members of the community who climb them).¹⁵ When the *pengewara* climb the tree they are said to become the *liau* and I asked one how this could be the case. "Yes," he responded, "we become the *liau*, because the *liau* are not visible. So the *pengewara* are forced to play the part of the *liau*." "So were the *pengewara* then possessed?" "Yes, possessed, possessed by the *liau*. Technically we are possessed (*istilah yaq senuan*)." In this and many other instances, possession that is in a way simulated is still considered to be possession by the Benuaq. This is similar to the case of *basir* shamans among the Ngaju, who do not take on the personalities of the spirits who enter them in rituals but who are nevertheless spoken of as if they were those spirits (Jay 1993: 163).

Yet Benuaq ritual specialists do not necessarily agree that ritual actions without altered states of consciousness count as being possessed. During a ritual song called the *léngot* (see the following section) that was sung as part of a larger *beliatn*, I once asked someone if the shamans who sang the part of the spirits during this song were ever possessed, but he just laughed

at my question. If they were to become possessed in the conventional understanding of the word, with all the unpredictability and potential chaos that possession represents, a successful *léngot* could not be carried out. So there is by no means uniformity of opinion on the issue. Yet within specialist discourse there is still a range of possibilities in the Benuaq word for possessed, from the highly formalized and controlled embodiment of the spirits to a total invasion where the possessed person loses control over his actions.

The rest of this chapter will explore three very different categories of possession that I encountered in the course of my fieldwork. I do not argue that these three categories are the only framework in which possession occurs. But they are helpful in understanding the general modalities of ancestral possession among the Benuaq. The first of these categories I call *formalized* possession: in this type of possession, of which I have already given some examples, ritual specialists speak in the voice of the ancestral (or other) spirits in highly formalized genres that are acted out or recited in specific ritual contexts. The specialists in these contexts do not enter into altered states of consciousness, yet nevertheless claim to speak and/or act under an agency that belongs to the spirits and not to themselves. The second category is *induced* possession. This occurs when a ritual specialist, almost always a *beliatn* shaman, brings a patient into a state of possession where the patient loses consciousness and/or control over his actions, but within a situation that the shaman (usually) remains in control of. The third type of possession is *spontaneous* possession. This involves a situation where a person (or multiple people) involuntarily becomes possessed by a spirit or spirits in a way that causes him to lose consciousness and also control over their actions and words. Whereas induced possession within *beliatn* shamanism is usually brought about in order to effect a cure, spontaneous possession is itself viewed as a kind of illness that needs immediate treatment. I will discuss these three types of possession in the case studies that follow to analyze the active role of ancestral spirits in different aspects of Benuaq social life, and the meanings that ancestral possession might take on. It is important to note here who becomes possessed in each of these categories: in the first case of formalized possession it is mostly ritual specialists; in the second case it is a patient who becomes possessed due to the intervention of a shaman; and in the third category, where the people who become possessed are least in control of their actions, it is ordinary people and not ritual specialists who are afflicted. In fact I know of no case

where a practicing ritual specialist became spontaneously possessed by a spirit in Benuaq Dayak communities in West Kutai district.

Formalized Possession and Exchange with Ancestral Spirits

Spirits are thought to be physically embodied in Benuaq ritual action in a number of ways. One of the most routine is within ritual contexts where the specialist assumes the voices of the spirits, yet the words spoken are for the most part already decided upon in advance. This can follow a set pattern of question, response, and final acceptance of the ritual offerings along a predetermined script with some variations depending upon the context. While there is always space for improvisation, especially by a more experienced singer (who might choose for example to address the audience, although this too is usually done using highly formalized speech rich with parables and metaphor), and singers often make some kind of commentary upon the ritual proceedings, the main thrust of the song is the interaction between ritual specialists (playing themselves) and the spirits (as played by the ritual specialists). “It’s as if the spirits come down” to become embodied in the ritual specialist, people told me in these contexts, never quite doubting that that was what was actually happening, but admitting that it always happens in a very controlled format.

As a basic definition then, formalized possession involves either the perfunctory actions or the repetition of words in a ritual context where no altered state of consciousness occurs, yet where the words or actions are believed to be carried out by unseen agents from the spirit world. Writing about the Merina of Madagascar, Bloch found a similar phenomenon in which “elders tended to adopt the method of speaking called . . . ‘ancestral speech,’ which means that they appeared to speak for the ancestors and not for themselves to the extent that sometimes they took on the role of the ancestors, saying ‘we the ancestors have come to bless you’” (Bloch 1986: 63). Such “ancestral speech” occurs on a number of occasions among the Benuaq, with two of the most common and elaborate being the ritualized song genres of *léngot* and *akai*, which invoke some of the most important Benuaq ancestral spirits. The *léngot* is a song genre sung in some longer *beliatn* curing rituals by shamans, who perform it as a dialogue with the spirits. It can be performed on several different occasions: as part of a longer *beliatn* (usually any one lasting for eight days or longer); in an *adat*

wedding; for the inauguration of a new village leader; to welcome a guest or group of guests; or on any other festive occasion.¹⁶ To *ngeléngot* involves an extended question and answer session, sung in highly formalized verses, between the ritual specialists and the spirits. The song begins with one singer, usually one of the shamans performing the ritual (although outside guests are occasionally brought in to sing), who assumes the voices of the spirits who have been called for the occasion, and asks what the news is and for what purpose they have been called. A second singer then responds, telling the spirits the purpose for which they have been called, and also giving a description of the ritual proceedings to date: he enumerates the ritual decorations (*ruyaq*) that have been made for the spirits, and points out the sacrifices that have already been offered or that are yet to come. The song then returns to the first singer, who accepts the offerings and sacrifices on behalf of the spirits. The spirits called in a *léngot* include the *nayuq* and *kelelungan* ancestor spirits, and the pantheon of spirit-people associated with Kilip, the culture hero mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.¹⁷ Thus the *léngot* calls specific, named spirits of relatively high status within the context of ritual mythology, yet highly removed from people's daily lives. Nobody would ever claim to be descended from the Grandmother and Grandfather of Dohorokng, for example, nor would most people other than ritual specialists even be able to identify who these spirits are.

The same is true for the analogous song genre found in mortuary ritual, the *akai*, although since a mortuary ritual involves more immediately known ancestors and relatives, the content of an *akai* song differs accordingly compared to the *léngot*. When the mortuary singer (*pengewara*, a specialist in singing *wara* mortuary songs) sings the *akai*, the names of the deceased and their dead relatives going back as far as people care to remember are sung out, in addition to more important *liau*, *kelelungan*, and *nayuq* spirits. At every mortuary ritual there are several points when the mortuary singers take out a sheet of paper on which the names of the *liau* and *kelelungan* of the deceased person's dead relatives are written and sing the names aloud. This is done to ensure that the newly deceased person has companions to help guide him on the road to Mount Lumut (the final resting place for the *liau*), and also for the spirits to leave their good fortune for the family (in the case of the *kelelungan*), as well as for the mortuary singers to ask for their forgiveness for any slights or forgetfulness on behalf of the deceased's family. But there is also a hierarchy of spirits which is reflected in the *akai*: the *liau* and *kelelungan* of the recently deceased ancestors are called, but only after

their 'leaders' have been invited by the singers. These 'leader' spirits include the 'kelelungan of old' (*kelelungan ro*) as well as important *nayuuq* spirits. In fact mortuary singers routinely refer to these spirits as *mantiq*, the word for the class of hereditary leaders of Benuaq communities, indexing their high status.

Benuaq ideas about possession and practices of communication with ancestor spirits come together most poignantly at two moments during mortuary rituals where the deceased *kelelungan* spirit communicates with the members of his or her family. The first instance to occur, which always happens in the ritual that is performed immediately after a person's death,¹⁸ is the *ngerarikng*, when the spirit of the recently deceased person arrives in the body of a female relative, who then cries out and wails in grief and tears (it is always a woman who does this, usually while the mortuary singers are singing an *akai* outside the house). The word *ngerarikng* evokes for people the most profound state of grief and sadness, yet its use is restricted to this specific ritual frame, and the *ngerarikng* also follows a rather formalized set of rules: as she sobs with grief, the female relative also speaks with the words of the deceased spirit, and her words accomplish two things. The first is to tell the personal story of the deceased relative, usually restricted to a narrative beginning with the person's illness and leading up to their eventual death. The second act that is performed is the spirit pointing out the failings of the living relatives in the care they gave to the deceased, to voice whatever complaints he may have had while still alive, but did not get a chance to. It is usually a close female relative of the deceased who does this, although it could also be a more distant cousin or niece; there are no fixed structural rules about who fills this role beyond the prescription that it be played by a woman. Within this set of rules, such women act as a kind of medium for the immediate ancestor spirits during a *ngerarikng*.

The second time that the dead souls speak to their living relatives happens later, through the mediation of the mortuary singers (*pengewara*). This is the *ngerinuq*, when the *kelelungan* are called by the mortuary singers just before they are escorted up to Tenangkai, their village in the sky. These *kelelungan* speak to the assembled family through the mortuary singers, and the content of their words follows two distinct themes. The first is an enumeration of the deceased person's property, which the deceased divides among his or her living relatives; the second is the final parting words of advice given by the deceased, a highly personalized statement of love that is addressed individually to each living adult member of the family. This is

always one of the most emotionally charged moments in a mortuary ritual: “It is like our own dead grandfather or grandmother has arrived” when this happens, I was told, and upon hearing these words of advice and consolation by the dead, each person who is so personally addressed will certainly cry without fail. That these sentiments of love and words of advice are expressed only after the earlier *ngerarikng* (which can be seen as a form of “ritualized weeping,” see Huntington and Metcalf 1991), might allow some relatives to expunge the feelings of guilt or other negative feelings associated with the deceased person.

In some cases people who are the descendants of shamans but who are not ritual practitioners are thought to have a greater propensity to become a shaman under the influence of spirits – a consideration to keep in mind when reading the Ibu Rumai case study below. But whether these spirits are the *kelelungan* of the genealogical ancestors who were shamans before, or some other spirits, or even some combination of these, is often unclear. In *beliatn* curing ancestors in the strict genealogical sense are called down along with spirits who are ancestral in the “mythological” sense. In the *beliatn luangan*, to give one example, the *kelelungan* ancestor spirits of a patient’s direct ancestors can be called down to help bestow their blessings and good fortune – this is accomplished by simply reciting their names and/or their teknonyms (*sengkulaakng*), and these names would only be called for the relative being cured. But before these ancestor spirits are called there is a group of older, ‘senior’ *kelelungan* spirits that first have to be called, and are called down each time a ritual is performed, again reflecting the hierarchy within the spirit world.¹⁹ These senior *kelelungan* who are called down in every ritual have an established “precedence” that lends them significance (cf. Sillander 2004: 216), and such original precedence is extremely important in Benuaq ritual thought and action. Yet in the *beliatn* rituals, both kinds of *kelelungan*, the universally known and locally specific, can be called to work. The senior, universally known *kelelungan* stand in a relationship to the direct genealogical ancestor spirits as leaders stand to ordinary members of a community: the names of accomplished leaders are more likely to be established in social and ritual memory, but their followers also play an important role in curing illness, giving blessings, and bestowing good luck.

These ritual song genres and forms of ritualized grief are the primary examples of formalized possession that the living, both ritual specialists and, in the case of mortuary ritual, living relatives, use to contact the dead,

both recent and long departed. Apart from requesting blessings from the ancestors, these forms of communication also index a continuing relationship of exchange with the mythological past. In all of these cases, even in the *ngerarikng* when it is said that the dead come directly to speak through the living, these forms of possession only take place within a prescribed format and are only possible within the framework of ritual speech and action. They could be said to involve possession by ancestors or other spirits only in the loosest sense of the term. Beyond this there are several examples of non-formalized possession experiences which I will explore in the following sections, primarily focusing on examples from *beliatn* curing rituals.

Induced Possession in *Beliatn* Shamanism

In the previous examples of formalized possession I have shown how ritual specialists and sometimes even ordinary people enter into relations of communication, supplication, and exchange with a wide spectrum of ancestral spirits. While these spirits often include one's immediate genealogical ancestors, such spirits exist within a hierarchy of precedence with historically senior spirits being of greater importance. Possession by these spirits in such ritual situations entails neither a change in consciousness nor a loss of bodily control.

The importance of more immediate genealogical ancestors can be seen in an example of spirit possession that was induced as part of a shamanistic curing ritual, where as part of enacting the cure the possessed patient lost control of her own actions. The case I will examine here is that of a young Bahau girl who lived further up the Mahakam River and was brought to the Barong Tongkok region where I lived to be treated in a shamanistic ritual called *beliatn sentiu* that is known for being effective in curing psychological problems. The girl had been ill for years, and the symptoms of her affliction were visible immediately upon my arrival at the ritual. After sitting alone in a corner and laughing to herself, the girl abruptly stood up and marched robotically out the front door towards the highway in front of their house. Her family rushed out to catch up with her just before she reached the road, where she collapsed and had to be carried back into the house. Her family told me that such behavior – random, unconscious, and potentially self-destructive – had been the symptoms of her illness for six years, beginning in her second year of high school in the city of Samarinda. She complained of recurring headaches and would frequently have fits and

faint, but in every hospital the doctors told her family they could find no illness. Finding no support from modern medicine, the girl's family had already turned to their ancestors for support and called upon the deceased great-grandfathers (*datuk*, Indonesian, hereafter I.) of the girl, one ancestor a Tunjung man and the other a Bahau, asking them to help the girl. Her father said that she probably would have already died if the *datuk* had not lent their protection when requested to do so. While I could not obtain specific biographical information about these two *datuk*, it seemed from comments made by the family of the girl that both great-grandfathers had once been senior figures in their communities. During the *beliatn* these *datuk* were again called upon to help cure the girl.²⁰

The diagnosis made by the shaman was that someone, possibly a jilted male suitor who had made advances towards the girl while she was in high school, but whom she had rejected, had performed or paid someone to perform an act of black magic to capture the girl's *juus*, or soul. The shaman in charge further speculated that the jealous man ordered someone from the Pasir district, a region infamous as a center of knowledge about such magic, to make her sick. On the final night of the *beliatn*, the shaman and his assistants called down the spirits of the sick girl's great-grandfathers, who then joined them to look for the girl's *juus*. During their journey up to the sky and through the underworld the shaman initiated a possession episode within the girl, inviting her *datuk* to enter her body to assist in her soul's recovery. When this happened the girl was possessed with such energy that her siblings had to hold her down by her arms and legs as the shaman and his assistants danced and sang around her. Eventually they were able to restore the sick girl's soul to her, and both the shaman and the girl's family remarked after the ritual was over that she appeared to be cured. The girl and her family stayed in the house where the ritual had been performed for the four-day period of taboo (*jariq*) following the ritual before they returned upriver to their home village.²¹

It should be said here that there is a cultural expectation among the Benuaq that women are more susceptible to spirit possession than men, although in this case it is important to remember that the girl's possession was induced as part of a cure rather than being a pre-existing symptom of the girl's illness (although her illness could feasibly have been described as a result of possession by a malevolent spirit, it was interpreted mostly as due to the effects of soul-loss). This case closely conforms to Lewis's model of "central possession cults," in which ancestral spirits are the guardians of

public morality and are called upon for curing illnesses, while the spirits that cause illness are exclusively non-ancestral (2003: 111–113). Benuaq society may exemplify many features of Lewis's model, yet the two following case studies show the dichotomy between "central" and "peripheral" possession cults that Lewis constructs to be untenable. I turn now to these examples.

Spontaneous Possession and the Conflicts of Modernity

The preceding examples are meant to show the ways in which ancestral spirits are called upon in the *beliatn*, the kinds of ritual work they can perform, and the range of forms that spirit possession can take when it is intentionally brought about by a shaman. But these examples tell only one side of the story, for spirit possession can also happen outside the context of ritual invocation, and in ways that can change the standing of the ancestors as well as have unpredictable consequences for their living relatives. I turn to two examples that elucidate the unpredictability and ambiguously benevolent and/or malevolent character of ancestor spirits in their interactions with people; the place of ancestors as intentional actors in Benuaq communities; and the establishment of an ancestor spirit through ritual transformation in the *beliatn*.

In October of 2006 I arrived mid-day on the first day of a children's *beliatn* (*beliatn anaak*)²² that was arranged for five newborn infants in the town of Barong Tongkok, to find the usual crowd of people outside, cooking, making *ruyaq* offerings and decorations, socializing. Several women were accompanying the shamans as assistants (*penuing*). But by the evening an additional woman, Ibu Rumai, a senior teacher at a local middle school, also began to sing and joined the ritual as an assistant. Although her parents and grandparents were well-known shamans, Ibu Rumai had never sung or danced in a *beliatn* before in her life, but she did so for the first time with ease – she later said that she felt as if all the words, the *bukutn beliatn*, were already inside of her. But by the middle of the second day she began to feel a strange shaking feeling in her stomach. She thought she was hungry and so took the unusual step of eating alone in the kitchen, instead of waiting for a meal to be served to the group. But eating did not solve the problem, indeed she continued to feel as if her stomach was being pounded from the inside by something invisible. This was the first physical sign of her coming possession. Later, during the activity right before the final sacrifices, Ibu Rumai was suddenly no longer following the group. She went into a



Figure 7.1. Ibu Rumai being brought out of her trance by the shaman conducting the children's *beliatn*.

trance and was dancing and jumping around the room randomly, her eyes closed and sweating profusely.²³ The sacrifices were made and the shaman brought this part of the ritual to a close, but with Ibu Rumai still in a trance the shaman had to make her sit and held a series of objects over her head as offerings to the spirits: a bowl of ritually prepared red and yellow rice

(*penyempayaan*) that is the resting place of the spirits during Benuaq ritual (see Figure 7.1); then a tray with folded cloth and a knife and another tray containing small bowls of food, both representing offerings to the spirits; and finally the shaman brushed her with a red cloth (see Figure 7.2) – red



Figure 7.2. Requesting the ancestors to help Ibu Rumai come out of her trance.

being the color usually associated with the *nayuuq* spirits. It was only as these offerings were made that Ibu Rumai regained consciousness.

It is not uncommon for women to go into a kind of trance near the end of the *ngeragaaq* portion of a children's *beliatn*, especially after the final sacrifices are made. But the trances are usually milder, the women much more in control of themselves and able to move into and out of the trance without much problem – they dance around briefly with their eyes closed and then quickly come out of it. As in many of the cases of formalized possession already discussed, these possession episodes usually have a simulated feeling, and the reason people give to explain them is fairly standard: the spirits want to express through the women their pleasure or satisfaction with the sacrifice. Ibu Rumai's possession on the other hand was the only one I witnessed where the trance caused an apparent loss of control over the person's body and required the mediation of a shaman with an offering to the spirits in order to bring the possessed back to full consciousness.

Unlike other possession experiences in this context, the people attending, and most of all Ibu Rumai, were at a loss to explain why her possession happened, although her personal history as the descendant of shamans who herself had previously abandoned this *beliatn* probably played a significant role. Years before, Ibu Rumai had stopped sponsoring the children's *beliatn* within her family after her first child was born and tried, in her own words, to “change to religion” (*kalé la agama*) – meaning that instead of sponsoring a *beliatn* for her children she would just have a Christian prayer service for their blessings. At that time she and her family were living and working downriver in Samarinda, and one of her justifications for this “change” was the distance between Samarinda and her network of kin and friends upriver whose participation was necessary to carry out a *beliatn* ritual. She also wanted to try to save money, and as she and her husband felt that holding a *beliatn* was too expensive, they hoped to achieve the same results more frugally through prayer services. But her second child developed a persistent skin disease that doctors at the hospital could not cure, and her third child had difficulty in walking and speaking during his first two years (her first child, who was born upriver, and for whom they did do the *beliatn anaak*, significantly had no illnesses or developmental problems as an infant). Doctors could not cure either of her two sick children, and Christian prayer services, including one with an American Pentecostal missionary, were ineffective. Eventually her grandparents, who were both shamans of high repute, prevailed upon her to return upriver and do the full

beliatn anaak for both children; after she did this, both of her children were cured. In addition to these experiences, the fact that she is a descendant of shamans also appears to have had a bearing on this case in that she had, while in Samarinda, consulted with a Benuaq diviner living downriver, on the recommendation of her upriver relatives, who told her that she had an 'inheritance' (*keturunan*, I.) which meant that her children had to have the *beliatn* done for them.

There was even more uncertainty about which kind of spirit had possessed her. Since she never spoke during the event, the spirit responsible for possessing her remained anonymous, leading to some speculation as to the spirit's possible motives and identity. At the time she herself attributed it to a *kelelungan* ancestor spirit ("They're strong, those *kelelungan*," she said right after she recovered from her trance); but she told me later that the shaman conducting the ritual had another theory: "He said it's possible there was a *jurokng*, it wants to *beliatn*" – meaning it wanted *her* to do the *beliatn*. The *jurokng* is a kind of protector spirit that is found in both the *beliatn* and in mortuary ritual. In the *beliatn* they are called the 'eight *jurokng*' (*jurokng walo*), and in the chants (*bukutn beliatn*) they rise up with the smoke of the incense to accompany the shamans to the sky, protecting them against malevolent spirits and other dangers there.²⁴ The shaman who told her about her *jurokng* was so impressed by her possession experience that he asked Ibu Rumai to visit his village and study the *ngeragaaq* with him as his student, but she was not at all interested in pursuing this option.

But Ibu Rumai did not want to become a shaman for several reasons. She was not happy about the experience of being possessed, and she also felt a little ashamed about it, perhaps because of the loss of self-control. "It's outrageous that I could be possessed!," she said afterwards with a laugh. She was also scared of being possessed again, as she remembered all the possessed people she had seen who drank the raw blood of the sacrificed animals. And as someone with a highly-prized civil service job in the town of Barong Tongkok, Ibu Rumai was not about to let the spirits interfere with the demands of her career as a teacher. Whether it was the *jurokng* or the *kelelungan* who wanted her to *beliatn*, she was equally uninterested in responding to their call. Nevertheless the fact that she was possessed by the unnamed spirit or spirits is indicative of the ambivalent position that many Benuaq faced in the region where I worked. Wanting to carry out rituals of supplication to the ancestors on the one hand, people also find these rituals and the concomitant demands of their ancestors to be strongly in conflict

with the demands of daily life as communities move away from a lifestyle based on agriculture and into a more modern economy.

It is worth noting that under the classical sequence of shamanistic recruitment as described by Eliade (1964), Rumai's initial possession would have been much stronger, followed by a period of convalescence leading to practice as a shaman, a sequence of events that is not very common among the Benuaq – a transition from unsolicited to solicited possession in Lewis's terminology. Rumai's possession was however relatively mild, and although it was interpreted as a calling to the shamanist profession, this was a calling that she was able and all too willing to refuse.

The Ancestors Talk Back: Spontaneous Possession and Ritual Transformation of an Ancestor Spirit

At the end of 2005 the village of Lempukng Bungaq²⁵ began to experience a wave of spirit possessions. The first was of an elderly woman, soon followed by a mass possession of children at the local middle school. Then in the first months of 2006 a girl in her final year of high school, Emi, was also possessed and became ill as a result. But Emi's possession was remarkable in that, unlike the previous episodes in the village, hers was caused by a deceased relative, her own great-grandfather Kakah Bulan, who spoke through her when she was possessed. And unlike the earlier possessions in the village, Kakah Bulan (and apparently his fellow spirits, as he usually spoke in the plural) made specific demands on his descendants through the voice of his great-granddaughter: he/they wanted to be given food and other offerings, including a water buffalo sacrifice, and Kakah Bulan wanted to be made into a 'protector spirit of the village' (*tangai kampukng* or *tangai benua*). Once all these requests were satisfied, Kakah Bulan and his associates (and it was never clear exactly who these spirits were) said they would leave the girl alone. By all accounts Kakah Bulan had been a fierce, quick-tempered man, reputed to have killed many people during the era of headhunting wars (*jaman bala*), and was someone whose requests, even those made from the grave, were not to be taken lightly.²⁶ To be made into a *tangai benua* protector spirit involves a very specific ritual transformation of the identity of a deceased human soul, from a general status of *kelelungan* ancestor spirit to that of *nayuyq*, a category of spirit that protects the living, although there is considerable overlap here, as *kelelungan* can also serve this purpose. But the *nayuyq* are thought to be more powerful (cf. Sillander 2004: 221), and there

are specific named *nayuq* that are likened to the 'leaders' of the spirit world, at least in the context of ritual practice. This ritual transformation is done by a shaman and is thought to be best accomplished in a *beliatn nalitn tautn*, a ritual that requires considerable sums of money and at the least thirty-two days to carry out.

When I first went to the house of Emi's family at the end of February, it was the sixteenth day of the first part of the *nalitn tautn* ritual done to install Kakah Bulan as a *nayuq* spirit.²⁷ I found the house packed with members of the extended family living in the house, relatives from other villages, children animatedly running around, and the shamans sitting in three groups and singing around the large ritual altar (*balai*) constructed in the middle of the main room of the house. The male shamans were sitting together and singing to request medicine from the *nayuq* spirits for the girl and her family; a group of five or six women, the female shamans and their assistants, were on the other side of the *balai*, conducting the women's part of the ritual. There was a short break and then the shamans stood up to present the ritual offerings to the spirits in anticipation of the sacrifices that would be made later in the night. The sacrificial animals – five large pigs and fourteen chickens – were already tied up on the porch outside. One of the shamans from the village, Mikael, told me that if everything went smoothly they could finish the remaining part of the *beliatn* in eight days, but if not it would take at least sixteen days in the *balai tautn*. Ordinarily he said they would not do any *beliatn* that long at that time of year, during the harvest season, but they were compelled to do this one now because the circumstances of the sick girl's possession demanded it.

Things did not go as Mikael hoped, however, and the *beliatn* continued for another month before the final sacrifices. I stopped by on a few occasions over that month to check up on their progress. As inevitably happens there were delays for any number of reasons; in this case the sponsoring family needed more time to accumulate the materials necessary for the ritual. An increasingly frequent problem now facing *beliatn* rituals of this size is a shortage of man and woman power. According to Mikael, traditionally it would have been mandatory to have eight male ritual specialists for the men's part of a *nalitn tautn* like this, but now they were lucky to get five.²⁸ The number eight is both ritually significant – longer *beliatn* are counted in eight-day blocks of time – and having that many people also allows for a division of labor between the shamans that makes the work of doing the ritual easier, and go faster. For example, if a large number of people know all

the origin myths (*tempuutn*) that are sung as part of the ritual program, the recitation of these can be divided and done concurrently in a much shorter period than if only one or two knowledgeable specialists were to do the same work.

The family sponsoring the *beliatn* had their own obstacles to deal with, primarily the cost of holding such a long ritual: all the money necessary to pay for all the ritual's necessities came from the pockets of the family members themselves, and except for during the very final days there was no gambling tent set up for the family to get contributions from others for the ritual "in an indirect way" (*secara tidak langsung*, I.). On one visit one of the senior shamans gave me a detailed history of some longer *beliatn luangan* that had been done in different villages over the years, and concluded with the statement that, in the current era, it was rare to finish a long ritual without financial help from the government – and this *nalitn tautn* was getting no such aid. And assistance from the community at large in Lempukng Bungaq was uneven.

Ordinarily a *nalitn tautn* is done for an entire village community, to 'nurse the year' as the meaning of its name suggests: to ensure the bountiful growth of crops and fruit trees, the fertility of the soil, and to ward off human and agricultural pestilence for the coming year. This particular ritual was also done towards those goals, on behalf not only of Emi but her extended family and also for the fertility of the village's *lati tanaa*, its 'forests and soil'. But involvement by the political officials of the village was minimal, and while some neighbors outside the immediate household donated rice and other food and lent material support to the family, the lack of any participation by other neighbors was a sign of critical fault lines within this neighborhood. Many of their neighbors and close relatives had converted to Pentecostal Christianity over the years and had long ago rejected *beliatn* rituals as Satanic, and they refused to participate in the *nalitn tautn* in any way.

The day of the final water buffalo sacrifice came almost exactly one month after my first visit.²⁹ Buffalo sacrifices draw large crowds and as usual a kind of fair grounds had been opened along the streets between Emi's house and the field where the buffalo was in its pen, awaiting its end. Traders, many of them Javanese or Bugis, arrived early in the morning or the previous night to set up their tents, and a small gambling tent was also running between two houses, modest in comparison to what one usually finds at such a ritual. Two of the male shamans began to recite the origin myth of the water buffalo (*tempuutn keréwau*) from atop the pen at around

10:30 am, with a large crowd of people gathered about around the buffalo below, listening to their words in the hot mid-day sun. By early afternoon all the shamans moved into the *balai tautn* for the *ngeléngot pesalukng*, a ritual activity belonging to the *léngot* category (see section on formalized possession above) which is performed to request that the spirits gather and see that the sacrifices have been prepared as promised, and will soon be ready for them to receive. They began with the words of the spirits, who are considered their 'guests' and who asked why they had been invited. The shamans responded, singing about what they accomplished that day, and pointing out the trays of food, the pigs, chickens, and buffalo to be given over to the spirits later. For the first half of the *ngeléngot* one of the shamans accompanying the singers wore a woman's skirt, a wreath made of leaves on his head, and a basket on his back, and at a specific point in the song he stood and walked towards the kitchen with a limp and supported by a man from the family holding on to his arm. In his dress and his limp the shaman here represents the ancestors from long ago (*ulutn ro*), and he goes to ask for contributions from the ancestor's descendants as a way for the descendants to give their blessings to the ancestors. The shaman limped into the house, where he was given contributions of plates, sugar, and packets of coffee from the kitchen to put in his basket, and he then disappeared into the crowded fair grounds outside the house, returning after a few minutes with bags of popcorn from the market stalls. By four in the afternoon the shamans were finished, and with a large group of people following them everyone moved from the house to the buffalo, where a final act of ritual singing was done to ensure the animal's willing passage into the afterworld when it was finally sacrificed.

A chaotic scene broke out at the end of the buffalo sacrifice. Precisely at the moment when the animal hit the earth, Emi also collapsed and was again possessed; a group of people had to hold her down as she wailed with eerie laughter. A large crowd gathered around her to watch this; from the edge of this group of people, where I also strained to get a look at what was happening, I saw another younger man from her house sitting on the ground to the side of the field, spitting up gobs of dark red buffalo blood – he had also become possessed and had drank the blood from the animal's open wound. Emi was carried over to the buffalo where they held her down and touched her feet to its body. As this happened another teenage girl fainted and was carried over to the buffalo. Then Emi spoke, between bouts of maniacal laughter, in the words of Kakah Bulan and his associates (using



Figure 7.3. Anointing the skull of Kakah Bulan with sacrificial blood.

the exclusive form of ‘we’). “We’re waiting for the end . . .” (“*Kaitn entiq solukng . . .*”).³⁰ One of the male shamans broke through the crowd with a buffalo horn filled with fermented palm wine and spoke to the spirits as he held this over Emi’s head. Another shaman from the village also appeared at her side, whispered something into a handful of ritually prepared red and yellow colored rice, and he put the grains on top of her head. This he said was to ask forgiveness to Kakah Bulan and his unseen entourage, so that they would stop bothering the girl. Eventually Emi was brought back to the *balai tautn*, where they continued to hold her down until the pigs there were sacrificed, and attended to her until she fully regained consciousness.

On the next and final day after the buffalo sacrifice, Emi and her extended family gathered in the *balai tautn*, where they were brushed with the ritual *selolo* leaves and anointed with oil, water, and the *jomit burai*.³¹ This was also the final act of anointing the skull of Kakah Bulan with the blood of the buffalo and other sacrificial animals (see Figure 7.3). There were in fact two skulls that received this *ngulaas* of sacrificial blood: Kakah Bulan’s and also the half-skull of someone said to have been a victim of one of his headhunting raids, killed during the *jaman bala*. Both of these skulls had



Figure 7.4. The final step in the transformation of Kakah Bulan into a *nayuq*.

been kept in the *longaan jejat* (apparently the same structure as the *longan teluyen* used by the Bentian, see Sillander this volume) for the duration of the ritual and taken out at specific moments to be given blood, food, and cigarettes in exchange for their blessings. I had heard rumors, before I first arrived at this *nalitn tautn*, that the plan for the ritual was to leave Kakah Bulan's skull permanently in the rafters of the house, but when I mentioned this to the shaman in charge he said they could not allow the skull to stay in the house beyond the length of the *beliatn*, saying, "It's too dangerous, he could get mad at his children and grandchildren there." Kakah Bulan's skull would be re-interred in the ironwood *tempelaaq* sarcophagus from which it came.³² But one of the final acts of this *beliatn* was to ritually change the status of Kakah Bulan in the spirit world from ordinary *kelelungan* to a guardian *nayuq* spirit. At the end of every *nalitn tautn* or other long-duration *beliatn luangan* there comes the *nempuk*, literally to send something back up to the sky. In three separate acts the shamans, together with the participation of the family, *nempuk jarukng*, to send up the *jarukng* spirit (*jarukng* is a kind of *seniang* spirit that is one of the main protectors of the shamans), and *nempuk sahuq*, to send away the incest not only of humans but also of cats,

dogs, farm animals, etc., all in an act of ritual purification for the village as a whole. But in this case the first act they did was to send up the *nayuyq* of the sunrise and the sunset (*nempuk nayuyq olo empat olo mate*). This involved standing around a red cloth, the *rentilui*, hanging from the ceiling of the *balai tautn*. This cloth served as the ladder that the *nayuyq* use to climb back up to the sky; using this cloth, the participants held up an overturned shield in which the skull of Kakah Bulan was wrapped in palm leaf (*biruq*), resting on top of cooked meat and with a folded red cloth on top (see Figure 7.4) – red being the color associated with the *nayuyq*. With some words from the shamans conducting this ritual, they along with Emi and her immediate family all held the shield up above their heads towards the sky, and with this ritual act Kakah Bulan climbed the red cloth to join the ranks of the *nayuyq*. With Kakah Bulan's identity as an ancestor thus transformed, the purpose for possessing his great-granddaughter had been fulfilled, and the girl suffered no further possession episodes.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the diverse ways in which ancestral spirits are intentionally invoked – or invoke themselves – in Benuaq Dayak ritual and daily life. It should be clear from the preceding examples that the Benuaq dead are anything but “castrated” (cf. Sellato 2002): they are called upon to give their blessings and assistance to the living, and also unexpectedly call upon their descendents, sometimes to send ambivalent signals and at other times to make explicit demands. I have analyzed three different types of spirit possession to elucidate the active role of ancestral spirits in Benuaq life.

The first examples illustrated a type of formalized spirit possession, in which ritual specialists “speak” or act with the agency of spirits who are usually older and more established ancestral spirits. Possession in these cases is very perfunctory and the ancestral words are usually spoken along pre-established scripts. Many of these scripts, such as the words sung during a *léngot* or *akai*, have been handed down from teacher to student over many generations and are often said to have originated with the oldest ancestors of the living. Both long-established ancestral spirits and more recent genealogical ancestors can notably be called upon to grant blessings in these contexts.

Second, I examined a case of induced possession, done during a *beliatn* curing ritual, to show how more recent genealogical ancestors are invoked

to actively assist their living relatives. Whereas possession under formal ritual circumstances is a highly controlled, pro forma activity, induced possession is much closer to the usual idea of spirit possession: a loss of bodily control and of consciousness in the possessed individual. In the context of this example, where a young girl was cured, at least temporarily, of a psychological illness in part through a direct appeal to her ancestors, induced possession worked as a kind of “controlled chaos” where the sick girl lost control of her actions but where the overall situation was within the control of the presiding shaman during the girl’s curing ritual. However it is important to note that in some curing rituals a shaman can lose control over the situation and the possessed patients can become violent or destructive to themselves or others. When this happens the culprit is usually a malevolent non-ancestral spirit which competes with ancestral spirits for control over the possessed person’s living soul.

Yet ancestors can also act in less than beneficent ways towards their descendants. A third type of possession was illustrated by a case of spontaneous possession which involved a recent, senior ancestor (the former community leader Kakah Bulan) who possessed his own great-granddaughter in order to communicate his demand that he be transformed into a village guarding spirit. While rare, such cases of spontaneous possession, where ancestral spirits intervene unbidden in the daily lives of the living, vividly demonstrate the agency which representatives of the unseen spirit world are granted in Benuaq life.

Along with such agency, there is also frequently much ambiguity in the identities of spirits and in their genealogical relationships with the living. This is not necessarily surprising, as a spectrum of spirit categories exists that often blurs the line between ancestral and non-ancestral spirit. Some spirit categories are necessarily ancestral by definition, such as the *kelelungan* and *liau*. As with the Berawan (Metcalf 1982), it is my opinion that the souls of the dead do become established as ancestral spirits as these two categories during secondary mortuary rituals (although the extent to which the *liau* can be considered ancestors is open to debate, given their malevolent character), becoming spirits that grant their blessings, protection, and assistance (in the case of the *kelelungan*). These two categories of spirits also punish transgressions of the social code, in contrast to the definition of ancestors given by Chambert-Loir and Reid (2002: xxi). In some sense the boundary between “ancestral” and “non-ancestral” is arbitrary, since this distinction is usually less important in Benuaq cultural and ritual

discourse than the distinction between human and non-human spirits. But even in that case the boundaries between the two categories are often not distinct, as there can also be a continuum between human and non-human spirits (Weinstock 1987: 79), just as there is a continuum within the range of ancestral spirits that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter: from the more distantly ancestral, illustrated by the *seniang* deities and mythological ancestors such as Kilip, the 'Father of Knowledge', to the more immediately ancestral *kelelungan*, of which Kakah Bulan provides a conspicuous example. Between these two poles are the *nayuyq*, who are often lumped together in ritual discourse with presumably non-human tiger spirits as the *nayuyq timaang*, and who are a kind of second-order or higher level ancestor than the *kelelungan*, with whom they share some characteristics, but who are also considered to be more powerful in the protection and blessings that they offer, thus placing them closer to the *seniang* in certain respects.

It has been widely argued for many parts of the world that only a select few of the dead become ancestors in any meaningful sense of the term. Thus Igor Kopytoff argues for Africa that "Not all but only certain dead with particular structural positions are worshipped as ancestors; and the behavior of ancestors reflects not their individual personalities but rather a particular legal status in the political-jural domain" (1971: 129). This argument was echoed by Newell, who claimed that for most societies in Africa and East Asia, "only a minority of the dead are chosen" to become ancestors (Newell 1976: 19). Sellato applies these arguments to Borneo, together with his own ethnographic data from the Aoheng, to advocate a narrow definition of ancestral spirits, where "ancestors are only a selected few among the multitude of ordinary deceased forebears" (2002: 14). So out of a large number of dead, the theory has it, only a small number become ancestors.

Yet the case of Kakah Bulan's transformation from a *kelelungan* ancestor spirit into the class of *nayuyq* complicates these generalizations, which can be diagrammed in the following model, where a ritual transformation after death that only a "selected few" undergo is represented by an arrow:

Non-Ancestor (most of the dead) → Ancestor (exemplary individuals)

The Benuaq case, as exemplified by the Kakah Bulan example, is structurally similar to this model, but it is not the same. Kakah Bulan was certainly an exemplary individual, and his ability to continue to affect the living long after his own death is no doubt responsible for his further ritual transformation into a *nayuyq* spirit. But to have achieved this he needed to be an ancestor first, a

transformation that happened in the past when he was ritually welcomed as a *kelelungan* during a *kuangkai* mortuary ritual. (It is probable that in the past relatively few people underwent the secondary mortuary rituals necessary to be installed as a *kelelungan*, but currently most adult Benuaq who still adhere to ritual traditions undergo this transformation after death.) Thus Sellato's model must be amended for the Benuaq case as follows, where the double arrow signifies people who have undergone the *kuangkai* stage of mortuary ritual:

Non-Ancestor → → First-order Ancestor (*kelelungan*) → Second-order Ancestor (*nayuuq*)

Among the Benuaq most adults thus become *kelelungan* spirits after death (as designated by the first double arrow), but only a selected few become *nayuuq*, which represent a category of ancestors in the restricted sense to which Sellato wants to reserve the word. But it would be seriously misleading to contend that this restricted sense is the only sense in which the Benuaq dead could be considered as ancestors. Rather than a clear division between two unambiguous categories, ancestor and non-ancestor, Benuaq recognize a number of different classes of ancestral spirits as has been detailed above.

Benuaq also recognize, as in the case of Ibu Rumai, that the identities of spirits are often destined to remain inscrutable and unknown. It is a rare case when the ancestors suddenly announce themselves, as in the example of Kakah Bulan. But these two cases of spontaneous possession do demonstrate one fact very clearly. Whereas in formalized possession the ancestors are invoked by the living to grant their blessings and general good fortune, in the cases of spontaneous possession detailed here we find almost the opposite: the ancestors use the living to fulfill their own demands.

Kopytoff mentions that in Africa, "The relation of the ancestors to their living kinsmen has been described as ambivalent, as both punitive and benevolent and sometimes even as capricious" (1971: 129), and David Graeber (1995) provides a detailed analysis for why this might be so among the people of Betafo in Madagascar. If there is a common thread that ties together the two cases of spontaneous possession discussed in this chapter, I would argue that it can be found in the widespread ambivalence that exists in most Benuaq communities in the Idaatn region about their own ritual and ancestral traditions in the face of conflicting pressures arising with modernity that define such traditions in pejorative terms.

Both cases of spontaneous possession discussed in this chapter reflect, in different ways, the widespread tension felt in Benuaq communities between

attachment to, and perceived dependence on, ritual traditions on the one hand, and overbearing social pressures that undermine those traditions on the other. These pressures include the failure to recruit new generations of ritual specialists, the marketization of ritual, state discourses of progress and development, and pressures to abandon Benuaq religion in the face of conversion to Christianity (on these issues see Payne, forthcoming). Spontaneous ancestral possession in these two cases can be interpreted as an expression of such changes. Here it is worth contrasting the declining significance of Benuaq ritual traditions with the example of Mahajanga, Madagascar, where ancestors are actively involved through communication in the process of social change: in Mahajanga, "Changes are worked out in conversation and debate with ancestors, with respect for and recognition of the past. The conflict or discrepancy between ancestral tradition and present contingency is made explicit. The present generally wins, but not until the ancestors understand the need for change and accept it" (Lambek 2002: 234). Benuaq ancestors have not been so lucky as to be included in a conversation about the social changes that are leading to their decline.

In seeking to transcend the debate about spirit possession between I. M. Lewis and Janice Boddy about the role of women in "peripheral" possession cults, Erika Bourguignon has argued that possession is a form of "dissociation in the service of the self" that works to express the basic motivations of the individuals involved (2004: 571). Yet the two cases of spontaneous ancestral possession presented here cast doubt on an analysis of possession that focuses on the interests of individuals as opposed to problems shared by a wider community of people. In the case of Ibu Rumai, the circumstances of her possession dovetailed with her personal history as a descendant of well-known shamans who had once considered abandoning Benuaq shamanism for Christianity. Her possession was interpreted by the shaman who brought her out of it as a sign that she was marked to become a shaman herself. This was a conclusion which she rejected as being incompatible with both her job as a senior civil servant and also with her sense of propriety – remember how repelled she was at the thought of becoming possessed a second time. While her possession was certainly an unconscious expression of her awareness of the decline of a shamanist tradition that she herself was an heir to, it was not also an expression of her wish to continue that tradition.

In the case of Kakah Bulan, however, the girl's possession by her great-grandfather demanded a community-wide response that was in accord with traditional ritual practices that are increasingly under threat. While

less than a generation ago the entire community would have responded to participate in the *beliatn* that fulfilled the ancestor's demands, the fissures in the community were exposed by the refusal of the girl's Protestant relatives to attend or assist in her ritual cure. It is entirely possible that her possession was triggered by problems of a more personal nature – although this remains unknown. However, the response that her possession demanded went far beyond what would be expected to help a teenage girl overcome the kinds of psychological pressures she might have faced. In both of these cases, ancestral possession did not function to serve the possessed individual so much as it made manifest problems that were larger than those of any individual. Commenting on spirit mediumship in a different context, Mageo writes that in Samoa “possessed individuals may be beset by moral-historical dilemmas that bear upon them personally; their apparent afflictions constitute creative attempts to contribute to collective understandings of these dilemmas” (Mageo 1996: 62). I argue that this is also the case in West Kutai, although the understandings reached are more tentative and ambiguous than those that Mageo suggests for Samoa.

Ancestors can act as the medium through which contemporary historical problems are expressed, but unlike the perspective of more functionalist analyses, these problems are not easily resolved by ancestral intervention alone. Unlike the example discussed by Nourse (1996), who found in upland Sulawesi that threats to traditional values came only from outside the community, a pervasive ambivalence exists within Benuaq communities generally towards *adat* traditions, especially *beliatn* curing. In the case of Kakah Bulan's possession, the ritual designated to cure the girl and satisfy ancestral prerogatives was once conducted jointly by an entire village group; yet in that example and increasingly elsewhere, a large segment of the village population who had converted to Protestant Christianity declined to participate in or lend any support to the ritual. Such feelings of hostility reinforce ambivalence towards tradition that comes on top of previously existing feelings of ambivalence towards ancestors and the spirit world.

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Notes

1 What counts as a “main” and “sub” dialect is highly subjective, and linguistic boundaries I draw here reflect the situated view of Benuaq communities living in the Idaatn region near the town and *kecamatan* seat of Barong Tongkok (cf. Coomans 1987), which is the region where I did most of the fieldwork upon which this paper is based.

2 The taboo spirit Jariq has a sibling named Liatn, and the two are often mentioned together. Luikng is called Lolaakng Luikng in Benuaq mortuary rituals but Luikng Ayaakng in *beliatn* curing rituals. Benuaq spirit names frequently change like this depending upon ritual context – although in this case both names translate as ‘beautiful Luikng’. Individual spirits often have multiple names, and are also constantly changing their names, making genealogical reckoning complicated. Thus in the story of the creation of the first *nayuk* spirits, Tamarikukng and Ayaakng Uyukng changed their names to Tatau Lisaatn Tunyukng and Ayaakng Dilaakng Tunyukng to hide the fact that their marriage was incestuous (Hopes et al. 1997: 35–36).

3 On the power of names among the Bentian, see Sillander (2004: 208).

4 There is a specific order of precedence in which the *liau* are sent away, with the oldest ancestral spirits (*liau nahaag*) that have been dead the longest sent away first, and then the most recently deceased sent away last (cf. Sillander 2004: 174 for the Bentian).

5 In 2006 I made a brief trip to attend a Benuaq mortuary ritual in the Ohokng region, and found that the practice of making a *sekuatn* for the *liau* was unknown there, a reminder that cosmological beliefs and ritual practices vary widely between different Benuaq subgroups.

6 I heard different opinions about whether the *kelelungan* ancestral spirits could also be included in the category of *pengngirikng* or not, though it seems logical to me that they would be. Among the neighboring Bentian the consensus appears to be that the *kelelungan* are also classified as *pengngirikng*, or as they are called there, *pengiring* (Sillander 2004: 191, 221).

7 According to Smith, dead souls in Japan are sometimes referred to as Buddhas (*hotoke*), but there is rarely any popular agreement on the distinctions between genealogical ‘ancestors’ (*senzo*), ‘ancestral buddhas’ (*hotoke*) and non-human deities within the Japanese spirit world (1974: 52–53).

8 Here I follow Firth's succinct definition of the difference between shamanism and spirit mediumship, namely that in mediumship a person is controlled by spirits, whereas in shamanism the specialist controls the spirits towards specific ends (Firth 1967a: 296). This heuristic dichotomy can easily be critiqued as being too simple compared to actual practice (e.g., Crapanzano 1977: 10), and some of the case studies presented in this chapter will themselves show examples of where the two halves of this dichotomy blur together. Nevertheless the distinction between shamanism and mediumship as defined above holds in most cases for Benuaq ritual practice. It appears that many Borneo societies have or until recently had both shamans and spirit mediums, including the Kayan (Rousseau 1993) and the Ngaju (Jay 1993). The Iban case appears to be the opposite extreme, as they have neither spirit mediums nor spirit possession (Graham 1987: 2).

9 Possession of this kind does not occur, however, in the *tumaakng* for a *beliatn luangan*, of which the children's *beliatn* and the *nalitn tautn*, both discussed later in this chapter, are examples.

10 Writing about the controlled possession of Tungus shamans, Lewis writes that "In the case of those who persist in the shamanistic calling, the uncontrolled, unsolicited, initial possession seizure leads to a state where possession can be controlled and can be turned on and off at will in shamanistic séances. This is the controlled phase of possession, where as the Tungus say, the shaman 'possesses' his spirits (although they also possess him)" (2003: 48). Lewis divided these two phases into the categories of unsolicited and solicited possession states.

11 This kind of possession rarely happens now, not that it was ever a common occurrence. The most recent example of this in the West Kutai region happened sometime in the 1950s, when a woman from the village of Keay became violently possessed by a spirit and then ill as a result. After a time of illness she recovered and was able to perform a novel ritual, the *beliatn jamu*, which is now commonly practiced in villages along the Idaatn, Pesikng, and Kedang Pahu rivers. The *beliatn senti*, one of the most commonly performed and studied rituals in the Benuaq region today, came into existence under similar circumstances sometime in the 1930s.

12 These so-called "crazy" shamans are people who were seized by a spirit at some time in their lives, and were subsequently able to do a *beliatn* without having studied with a teacher. However I met perhaps only two such "crazy" shamans in two years of fieldwork, and neither of those men enjoyed a very solid reputation as a ritual curer. For details about people becoming shamans directly through spirit possession among the Bentian, see Sillander (2004: 210).

13 This kind of agency is granted to spirits in a number of different ritual contexts and examples abound. When erecting a *belontaakng* sacrificial post, to give one more example, ritual specialists will claim that it is the *nayuyq* and not themselves who actually raise the post.

14 The *mujaat* is one type of ghost; the general term for ghosts in Benuaq is *wook*. According to its origin myth, the eight different species of plant used for the *aper* leaves (*dawatn aper*) were all once shamans who were turned into trees as the result of so many people pulling at them until they were all split in half. They are now divided, one half for shamanistic rituals and the other half for mortuary singers to use in mortuary ritual.

15 These trees are decorated with gifts (cloth, drinks, foodstuffs) tied to their top branches, and then the bark is stripped and greased with oil or pig fat to make them difficult to climb; getting to the top to get the gifts becomes a spirited competition among the people attending the ritual. The gifts are meant to be for the ancestral *liau*, but of course the human participants get to keep them too.

16 In no case is it permissible to sing the *léngot* in a village while there is an ongoing mortuary ritual; this is considered taboo (*jariq*) and at best would be punished with a fine.

17 For examples of other spirits called in the *ngeléngot*, it could call upon the *liau* of Itaak Kakah (grandmother and grandfather) Dahawékng, or Itaak Kakah Dohorokng, who are the *liau* of people who in Benuaq mythology lived long ago. Which spirits were called would depend on the occasion. Thus, for example, the *ngeléngot* sung at a wedding would call a different set of ancestral spirits, in that case the spirits involved in the *tempuutn* of the first marriage ceremony. See the *Tempuutn Langit Tana* in Hopes et al. (1997: 20–28), which contains variation on these names.

18 This stage of mortuary ritual is called *parapm api*, which literally means ‘to put out the fire’: “Death is pictured as a flame that still flares up and must be put out so that death does not continue to go on” (Madrah 2001: 99, my translation).

19 These *kelelungan* are also called by name: Dengkit Tungkas, Janyaakng Arus, etc.

20 I do not know the specific category of spirit that was called; *kelelungan* perhaps in the case of the Tunjung ancestor, but the Bahau do not have these spirits. I assume that the *datuk* were called directly by name and/or teknonym.

21 In this particular case the shaman employed a novel visual aid to help the girl recover: on the final night he produced from the ground outside the house a small glass vial containing a tiny carved figure, a small bead and a grain of sticky rice. It was in this particular vial, he claimed, that the person responsible for stealing the girl’s soul had placed it – the carved figure was a representation of the girl, and he claimed that the bead once belonged to her. The only reason the girl did not die, according to the shaman, was because the person who made the black magic had added a grain of sticky rice to the vial so that her soul could still eat and would not immediately die but slowly suffer. The intriguing artifice of using the vial here brings to mind the uses of deception by Iban shamans in the act of curing that are described and insightfully analyzed by Robert Barrett (1993).

22 The *beliatn anaak*, or *beliatn* for children, consists of three separate rituals carried out simultaneously over a period of two days, each addressing a different group of spirits: the *ngeragaaq*, done by women to call the *tonoi* and *nayuuq*; the *nataakng juata*, done by a man to call the *juata* and other spirits; and the *melas*, a Bahau ritual usually done in that language by a man.

23 Right before the onset of her full possession she could feel it coming on and said so to the shaman, who told her to go to the *longaan* altars and request that the spirits not bother her. But by then it was too late and she was dancing around the room, no longer in control of herself.

24 In mortuary rituals they are called the ‘seven *jurokng*’ (*jurokng turu*). Madrah (1997: 48) refers to the *jurokng* as a small statue and leaves it at that. Michael Hopes discusses the *jurokng* more thoroughly as the small wood carvings of human and human-like figures often worn in a necklace by a shaman, which is how the Benuaq most often think of this word, and he talks about the protective qualities of these statues (Hopes 1997: 103–108), but he gives few details on the spirits that these carvings represent. For both sets of ritual practice the *jurokng* appears to be related to the female rice spirit, *Luikng*, although I do not know the details of this relationship.

25 This name and the names of the people mentioned in this chapter are pseudonyms.

26 When I spoke to people outside of Lempukng Bungaq about the Kakah Bulan story they expressed their disapproval that someone would choose to possess one of their own descendants in that manner – what kind of man would do that? The combination of factors here, namely the morally ambiguous role of Kakah Bulan in possessing his descendant and the fact that the possessed person was a young girl, all work to complicate Lewis’s well-known distinction between “central” and “peripheral” possession “cults” (Lewis 2003).

27 The first sixteen days of a *beliatn* of this type, done inside the house, is called *bekéléu*. Depending on the needs and intentions of the ritual’s sponsors, they can stop at this level, usually with a final sacrifice of a cow. To continue beyond the *bekéléu* brings the *beliatn* to the level of *nalitn tautn*, which is completed in the *balai tautn*, a large temporary structure built outside the main house.

28 In most cases it is now a struggle to assemble even five male *pemeliatn* to participate in a ritual the size of a *nalitn tautn*, and I attended several such rituals where there was no woman’s component at all. Of the five men participating in this *nalitn tautn*, one was a beginner who was learning on the job. Mikael was an accomplished *pemeliatn sentiui*, but was also a relative novice in doing the *nalitn tautn*. The three most experienced men were all brought in from outside the village. One of them, Kakah Muka, was unquestionably the most experienced shaman there, but he was at the time somewhere between 90 and 100 years old, and the constraints of his age

– a bent-over frame, frail voice, and frequently faulty memory – were an obvious barrier to his fullest participation. And the one permanent resident of the village who knew how to do a *nalitn tautn* to its completion was invited to join at the outset, but for unknown reasons declined to, leading Mikael to cynically suggest, “Maybe this one isn’t big enough for him” – his implication being that the small scale of this *nalitn tautn* meant a smaller amount of ritual payment for the shamans at the end. The female shamans faced similar constraints: one additional woman was brought in from another village to help out in the second month of the ritual, but other women who were singing as assistants dropped out along the way.

29 The demands of Kakah Bulan did not make matters very easy for his descendants in this respect. Emi’s family already owned one buffalo, a bull that they wanted to use for the final sacrifice – at that time the market price for a buffalo of a size worthy of sacrificing was at least ten million Indonesian Rp, or 1,100 US \$, and often went higher – so the use of their own animal could have cut down significantly on their expenses. But the voice of Kakah Bulan ordered the family not to sacrifice that bull, as it already belonged to him in the otherworld, but to let it die on its own. He wanted another one. This demonstrates an important general point: ancestors can be demanding, and their demands are not always easy to fulfill for their descendants. The ethnography of Madagascar offers many examples of the difficulties of ancestral demands, and the dangers to the living of not carrying those demands out (cf. Graeber 1995, Lambek 2002).

30 They were speaking of their anticipation for the final buffalo sacrifice, which Kakah Bulan had commanded his descendants to carry out.

31 This is also known as *tepung tawar* in Indonesian, a mixture of water, rice flour, and ground turmeric, used for ritual cleansing. The *selolo* is a banana leaf that has been shredded until it resembles a piece of seaweed, and is used in almost every kind of *beliatn*.

32 It is possible, as Sillander has suggested (personal communication) that in an earlier era people would have been less uncomfortable with keeping ancestor skulls inside the house. On the other hand people generally do talk about the *nayuuq* spirits as being fiercer or more dangerous than the *kelelungan* and other ancestor spirits.

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CHAPTER 8

Ancestorship Without (Human) Ancestors: Ritual Hearths and Hierarchy in Gerai

Christine Helliwell

IN CONTRAST TO THE PEOPLE of many other Borneo Dayak societies, those of Gerai¹ appear, at first sight, to be little interested in ancestorship, with most individuals unable to name their own direct ancestors beyond two generations. Yet, as I will argue in this chapter, while direct human ancestorship is downplayed, there is a form of ancestorship that is stressed and, indeed, valorised in the community: that traced through a set of ritual items that I collectively term a “ritual hearth.”² The only time I have ever heard Gerai people use the term *keturunan* (‘descent line’) is with reference to hearths: there are no human descent lines in Gerai, only ‘hearth descent lines’ (*keturunan dapur*). While, as already noted, most Gerai people cannot name their own direct ancestors beyond two generations, anyone with guardianship of a ritual hearth is able to recount much of the ancestry of that hearth: the hearths from which it has descended, the human guardians whose hands it has passed through, and the dwellings in which it (and often its hearth ancestors) have been located. In this way, as we shall see, they are able to locate themselves within what Fox (1988, 1995) has termed an “origin structure,” a system of precedence that underlies and orders relationships within the community.³ Thus, while ancestorship is crucial to the organization of social life in Gerai, this is not the conventional form of ancestorship found elsewhere, based as that is in the tracing of connections to particular human forebears. Rather, ancestorship in Gerai involves the tracing of connections to particular *ritual hearths*.

Ancestorship in Gerai: the Ritual Hearth

Gerai people generally display little interest in named human forebears, and ancestorship in the conventional sense plays little part in the activities of

daily life. This is as true of religious/ritual activities as it is of those of a more mundane nature. Of the myriad characters named in myth or in the prayers and chants that mark the commencement of many activities (including eating, setting out on a fishing or hunting expedition, and many forms of ricefield work), Gerai people agree, when pressed, that some were long-ago people of Gerai (*reng Gerai*), but they show little inclination to claim them as direct ancestors (*akei'-inei'*: literally, 'grandfathers-grandmothers'). Thus Koling, the legendary hero of many Gerai stories, is described as *reng Gerai* of long ago, but no individual in the community today would ever claim him as a direct forebear, except in the generic sense that as a pioneer of the community everyone must have some connection to him. The majority of characters named in myths and prayers are non-human beings of various kinds, many with extraordinary powers that can be used for good or for ill in the lives of Gerai people. No Gerai person would wish to claim ancestry to most of these beings, although some members of the community are believed to have special connections with them, and to be able to influence their behaviour.

This lack of interest in conventional ancestorship is reflected in Gerai beliefs and rituals around death. Gerai people believe that, on death, the spirit of the dead person (*antu*, *antu sebayan*, *antu pederu*) travels to the land of the dead (*sebayan*) and settles down to live in that land. In order to assist in the journey, and to prevent the spirit from returning to trouble the living, great care is taken to ensure that funerary rituals and mourning practices are correctly carried out. These rituals and practices include the maintenance of taboos of various kinds (on leaving the house, on particular forms of work, on eating certain foods and so on) for prescribed periods of time, and the arrangement of a careful selection of objects used in daily life (work tools, cooking and eating implements) on the dead person's grave in order to equip his or her spirit for life in *sebayan*. In most cases, direct communication with the dead person ceases once these rituals and practices have been completed, although many Gerai people claim to receive advice from deceased close relatives (usually parents and/or grandparents) in the form of omens or dreams. On those occasions when a recently dead person's spirit refuses to settle in *sebayan*, and instead returns to Gerai to haunt the living (usually because the appropriate rituals and practices have not been performed correctly), additional rituals are carried out until he or she is appeased and finally departs for *sebayan*. Once the spirit is established there, Gerai people's memory of the person gradually fades until, beyond two generations, even his or her name may no longer be recalled.

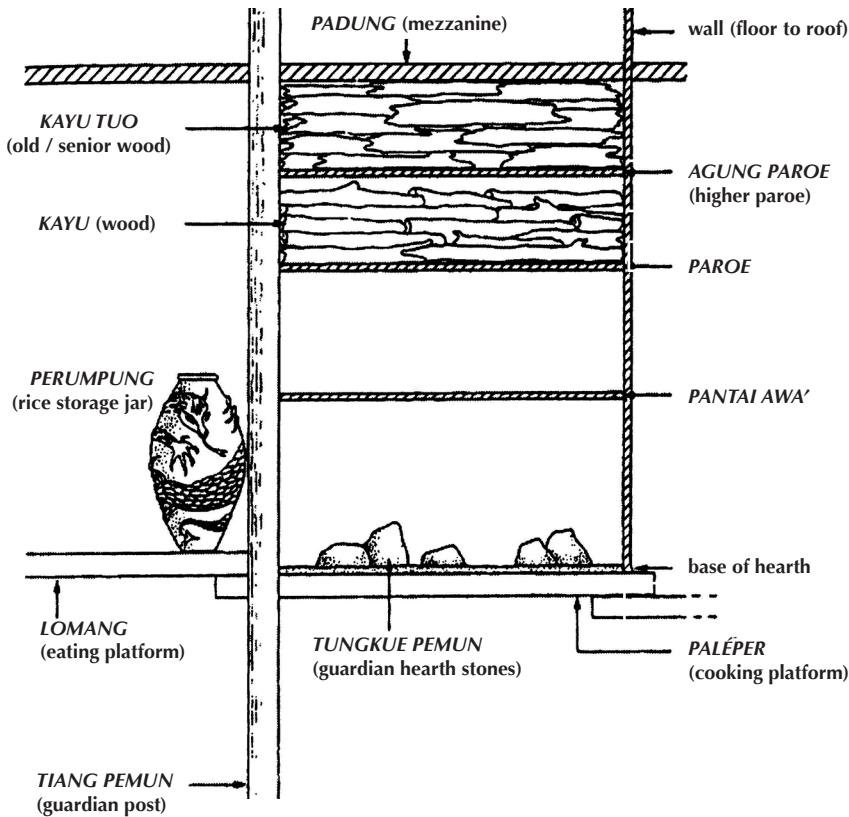


Figure 8.1. The cooking hearth in a *rumah rayo*: the focal point of its ritual hearth.

However, while direct human ancestors play little part in the world of the living, the same cannot be said for ritual hearths and the form of ancestorship that they entail. Gerai people believe their world to be fraught with danger and potential disorder emanating from spirits, from humans, and from generalized cosmic disruption or imbalance. This may be controlled, they believe, only through the operation of their *adat* – a term which in its narrowest sense denotes customary law, but in its broader sense evokes notions of the maintenance of universal order and balance. Through affiliation to a ritual hearth, each rice group⁴ in Gerai comes under both the authority and the protection of *adat*. The items that constitute a ritual hearth have been handed down from mythical ancestors, who in turn received some of them long ago from deities living in the sky. Ritual hearths thus connect Gerai people not only to powerful ancestors and their sky deity

consorts but, indeed, to the origins of *adat* itself, in the activities of those ancestors.

In order to obtain the protection of *adat*, a Gerai rice group must affiliate to a ritual hearth. Those groups that do not have guardianship of their own ritual hearths must attach themselves to the hearths of groups that do. The ritual hearth confers protection on all dwellings and ricefields associated with it, while at the same time its presence signifies its guardian group's willingness to ensure that the behaviour of those associated with it always meets the standards laid down by the *adat* code.

Guardianship of a ritual hearth involves a group's possession of seven items (see Figs. 8.1 and 8.2). These items are as follows:

- one pair of *subang* (gold earrings, often antique)
- *abudapur* (ritual hearth ash)
- one *tungkuwe pemun* (guardian hearth stones)
- one *perumpung* (ritual rice storage jar)
- *padi* (standard rice)
- *pulut* (glutinous rice)
- two (at least) *jungkal* plants or seeds (see Figure 8.3).⁵

These items are intimately connected with the *rumah rayo* ('greater/principal dwelling') – that name given to any dwelling in which a ritual hearth is based. Under customary law, a *rumah rayo* must be a solid, permanent dwelling built to very particular specifications, and it must be found in the village proper. The actual cooking hearth (*dapur*) of the *rumah rayo* is the focal point of the ritual hearth, with four of the items that comprise a ritual hearth being located inside, or close to, it. While every dwelling – even a humble farm hut – has a cooking hearth, only a small percentage have a *ritual* hearth, that is, a hearth that has been sacralized through the group's ritually taking possession of the necessary seven items.

The seven items that constitute a ritual hearth are said to be in the care of the *bungkung rumah* ('origin/essence/root of the dwelling/rice group'): that person or married couple responsible for the continued well-being of the hearth, and thereby of those people who affiliate to it. A ritual hearth was often described to me as resting 'in the hand' (*lem jari*) of the *bungkung rumah* and, like rice, was often depicted as a child in the context of this relationship. Thus on a number of occasions I heard the *bungkung rumah* referred to as 'the lap of the hearth' (*mangkue dapur*). In explaining to me



Figure 8.2. A woman cooks at her longhouse cooking hearth, the focal point of her ritual hearth.

why the word ‘lap’ (*mangkue*) was used here an informant told me that the hearth “*arus dipangkue tokoh ana’. Yeng mangkue, iyo yeng tungu-e, yeng ngingun*” (“must be held in the lap, like a child. The person who is the lap, it’s that person who guards it, who takes care of it”). Like both children and rice, ritual hearths must be nurtured and protected so that they will in turn nurture and protect. *Bungkung rumah* attain the position either through inheriting a principal dwelling, or by taking a hearth from an already-existing one in the village and so creating a new principal dwelling. In either case, since the dwelling is their property, they have guardianship of the ritual hearth that it contains.

In Gerai, only one member of an adult sibling set stays on with the parents in their dwelling; the rest move out on marriage. Consequently, many young couples do not stand to inherit dwellings – with associated hearths – from either set of parents, and so must build new ones of their own. However, many couples lack the resources to build the solid, permanent dwelling necessary to house a ritual hearth and live, instead, in makeshift structures of bamboo and bark, often at their ricefields. Consequently, they are unable to take guardianship of their own hearths and must instead affiliate to the hearths of others. Normally couples in this situation affiliate to the natal

hearth of one of the partners; as far as I can tell there is no generalized preference for affiliation to the hearth of either the husband's or the wife's natal group, and roughly equal numbers of young couples affiliate to each of these. It is unthinkable in Gerai for a group not to have either guardianship of, or secondary affiliation to, a ritual hearth, since only through such association with a hearth can it receive the protection that *adat* confers. Regardless of whether a group has its own hearth or affiliates to the hearth of another group, the ritual hearth with which it is associated extends protective power across all of its dwellings, rice storage huts, and ricefields. Without such protection a group would be lost and alone in an alien and terrifying world.⁶

In Gerai vernacular, a powerful distinction is drawn between those groups with guardianship of their own ritual hearths and those without. The former are described as groups that *diri* ('stand'), that is, that take responsibility for themselves in the ritual and legal domains. The latter are described as groups *yeng numpang* ('who attach themselves to/are dependent on others'). In my field notebooks I glossed groups *yeng numpang* as 'hangers-on', since this translation seemed best to capture the somewhat denigratory overtones



Figure 8.3. A ricefield ritual showing a ritual specialist blessing a basket of *pulut* (glutinous rice) with *jungkal* plants resting in the background. Both *pulut* and *jungkal* are necessary components of a ritual hearth.

of the Gerai original. Up until thirty-five or so years ago, before dwellings that were not principal dwellings were permitted in the village, such rice groups were generally forced to live outside the village. Nowadays they have available to them the extra option of building and living in a temporary dwelling while remaining in the village.

If such a couple is able to build itself a permanent dwelling in the village, it is likely to wish to take a ritual hearth of its own, and so take responsibility for its own legal and ritual affairs. If a rice group does decide to 'stand', it must take its ritual hearth from an already existing one. It is up to the individual rice group to choose from which hearth its own will be taken. While a number of factors may influence the decision, normally (although by no means always) a new hearth is 'broken' (*pocah*) from the natal hearth of one of its heads, the same hearth to which the couple had previously affiliated.⁷ Such 'breaking' of a hearth involves the rice group whose hearth has been chosen giving the seven items that comprise a ritual hearth to the group which is setting up the new hearth. The group whose hearth is being 'broken' takes a handful of ash and a cooking stone from its cooking hearth, a harvesting basketful of standard rice seed and one of glutinous rice seed from its storage hut, two *jungkal* seeds from its rice fields, and a pair of gold earrings and a large Chinese ceramic jar from among its heirlooms (or, if it has none, it will buy the earrings and jar from a trader). At the ceremony to 'stand up' the ritual hearth (*bediri dapur*) the hearth stone and the hearth ash are ritually embedded by a spirit medium in the cooking hearth of the new principal dwelling.

In the act of creating a new ritual hearth, the new guardians of that hearth become linked to all the hearths that have gone before it, as well as to all the guardians of those hearths. Most importantly, via the hearth, they are located within a hearth descent line (*keturunan dapur*) tracing ultimately back to a mythical ancestor and through him to a deity in the sky, and so to the origins of *adat*. The *keturunan dapur* creates the lines through which *adat* descends from one generation to another, and so the means by which community well-being and harmony – bestowed on ancestors many generations ago – are able to endure into the present. That this is so can be seen most clearly by examining the *subang*, or gold earrings, said by Gerai people to be the most important element of the ritual hearth.

Gerei people describe the *subang* as preceding the hearth, and so providing its foundation. A friend once explained this to me simply as "*subang-te, iyo tuo dari dapur*" ("the *subang*, they're older than [senior to] the hearth"). The *subang* are conceived of in this way because more than any other of the

items that make up a ritual hearth, they establish a direct relationship with a specific, mythical ancestor. Of particular importance is the fact that the *subang* are a physical manifestation of the *mali keturun* ('descent taboos'): taboos on the entry of particular foods into any dwelling that contains a ritual hearth, and on the consumption of particular foods by members of the rice group associated with it. When a hearth is broken in order to create a new hearth, not only the seven ritual items that constitute a ritual hearth are taken into the dwelling of the new guardian group; so too are the identical set of food taboos adhered to by the group from which the hearth was taken. In other words, the food taboos – 'descent taboos' in the words of Gerai people – descend along with the hearth.⁸

The food taboos exist in order to protect valuables brought back from the sky by the original founding ancestor of the hearth. These valuables, in turn, provide *saksi* ('proof/evidence') of the relationship between that ancestor and a sky deity, and so constitute a tangible manifestation of the gift of *adat* itself. This becomes clearer when we consider the one origin tale of an 'original' hearth that I was able to collect in Gerai. Only a handful of the ritual hearths in the village are described as having been handed on directly from mythical ancestors; the rest have been 'broken' from these, or from others that have been broken. Of the 'original' hearths only one had an origin tale; the rest were said to be forgotten.⁹

The origin tale of this 'original' hearth (as told to me by an elderly kinsman of its guardians) traces the journey of Akei' Tiangbeu ('Grandfather Shoulders like Posts'), a man from Gerai long ago who climbed up an immensely tall tree and found himself in the sky. Once there he married Inei' Bintang Tigo ('Grandmother Three Stars'), the deity who is said to live in the star constellation of Orion's Belt. One day, looking down through a tall Chinese ceramic jar, he glimpsed his old home of Gerai again, his wife and his children. And he grew homesick and decided to return. When Inei' Bintang Tigo realised that he was leaving, she collected an assortment of leaves and roots and changed each of them into a valuable for Akei' Tiangbeu to take with him: gold, fine cloth, jewelry, bowls, plates, and other antiques. "*Nyo baiye kau kulu. Nyo cerito kau jedi ken Inei' Bintang Tigo – tue-lah saksi kau jedi ken Inei' Bintang Tigo*" ("These are for you to take upriver. For your story that you married Inei' Bintang Tigo – these are proof that you married Inei' Bintang Tigo").

The story goes on to describe how Akei' Tiangbeu climbed down from the sky, and eventually found his way back to Gerai. Once there he detailed

his journey and his marriage to Inei' Bintang Tigo to his co-villagers. In the words of the storyteller:

"So I was told to climb down, and I was provisioned with plates, with bowls, with cloth, with bracelets, with rings. This is the proof that I lived in the sky with Inei' Bintang Tigo. But there must be taboos so that these are not destroyed."

So he came back to Gerai and married his wife again, he married Inei' Buraipansai. Then it descended again to the grandmother of the grandmother of Rondot.¹⁰ To the grandmother many times back of Rondot. It's already many times descended. Then to the grandmother of Rondot, to Rondot's mother, then to Rondot. The plates are all broken so that only pieces remain, the cloth is all torn so that only pieces remain – over time they've disintegrated. The gold is still there.

So to finish off. . . . In the day of their [the members of that rice group's] ancestors [literally, 'grandmothers and grandfathers'] . . . in the past . . . it was taboo to cook food using turmeric, because they kept gold made from turmeric. It was taboo to eat *runcking* because they had cloth that was made from *runcking*.¹¹ In the time of their ancestors in the past those foods were very strongly tabooed for that dwelling. Then they began to spread out. They spread out so that now all the descendants from that dwelling cannot eat those foods.

While the specific origin tales of the other original hearths are said to have been forgotten, Gerai people believe that all have a similar origin – they were obtained, along with other gifts, from sky deities. It is clear that, as Gerai people understand it, the food taboos exist in order to preserve the original gifts, and that these gifts in turn constitute proof (*saksi*) of a relationship between a Gerai ancestor and such a being.

The relationship between a Gerai ancestor and a sky deity is not only significant in itself, but additionally so because the sky deity is believed to have imparted a knowledge of *adat* to the ancestor in question as part of that relationship. The gifts thus provide evidence of the transformation of the ancestor, and those others who came to affiliate to his ritual hearth, from people without, to people with, *adat*. The same storyteller explained to me that before the trips to the sky of Akei' Tiangbeu and those Gerai ancestors who founded the other 'original' hearths, the people of Gerai were still in the *jaman Dimamang* (Dimamang era).¹²

There wasn't yet any *adat*, no *adat*; Dimamang didn't have much knowledge. He was ignorant/undersocialized [*buduh*]. At that time, in the past, a long time in the past, there were many killers and dangerous men in the world. It wasn't safe here then, as it is now.

It was the trips by Akei' Tiangbeu and other ancestors to the sky that marked the change of those in the Gerai community from undersocialized, 'unknowing' (*buduh*) people to people with knowledge (*dah tau*). The gifts given to these travellers by sky beings signified the receipt of a much more profound gift: that of *adat*.

In this respect, it is important to note that perhaps the two most important elements of the ritual hearth after the *subang* – the *padi* (standard rice) and the *pulut* (glutinous rice) – are also believed by Gerai people to have been given to them as gifts by the powerful sky people. As I have argued elsewhere (Helliwell 2001), along with *adat* rice is the most important element of the Gerai world; its production and consumption provide the parameters within which life is ordered and made meaningful. Rice is said to have a number of different origins (most commonly, it is said to have sprouted from the body of a dead woman), but Gerai people generally agree that before contact was made with the sky people, the rice that was grown and eaten in the community was coarse (one or two grains were sufficient for a meal) and unpleasant tasting. As well as the gift of *adat*, the sky people gave Gerai people the strains of rice that are grown today: characterised by fine grains and good flavour. While, as the tales tell it, the ancestors who obtained "modern" rice were different from those who obtained *adat*, it is no coincidence that both items were gained from the same source. Not only are they the two central elements in Gerai life; in addition, *adat* – and the ritual hearth – is focused more on the protection of rice, both while growing in ricefields and while being stored and cooked in the village, than on anything else. Gerai people perceive themselves to be most vulnerable to harm – both by spirits and humans – via their rice; this is the reason why the items comprising a ritual hearth are located either in the ricefield or inside, or close to, a dwelling's cooking hearth where its daily rice is cooked.

With the gift of *adat*, Gerai people gained two things: safety/protection, and socialisation/knowledge. The fine cloth, gold, plates, and so on constitute evidence of a shift in status by Akei' Tiangbeu's rice group – from a group without a ritual hearth to one with a ritual hearth and therefore with *adat*. But since these original gifts cannot be passed on each time a new ritual

hearth is broken from the original one, the *subang* instead constitute a physical manifestation of the food taboos and so serve to protect the original 'evidence' – the fine cloth, gold, and so on – through ensuring the maintenance of those taboos. Both *subang* and taboos serve to mark the location of the hearth within a hearth descent line, and so to signify its ancestry and ultimate connection back to a deity in the sky, and so to the origins of *adat*.

Ancestorship and Precedence

The preceding section has emphasised the *protective* function of ritual hearth affiliation; however, Gerai people see this as being inseparable from its *regulative* function. Indeed, they believe that if one wants to be assured of ritual hearth protection, one must behave in accordance with the code laid down by *adat*, involving, in its broader sense, considerate and respectful behaviour towards all beings and, in the narrower sense, acquiescence to the authority of the customary law regulating behaviour between human beings. In other words, affiliation to ritual hearths not only links people to mythical ancestors and so to the origins of *adat*, but also locates any group within a system of precedence and authority regulating the behaviour of all individuals within the community (*adat* in its narrower sense). Indeed, precedence in Gerai is rarely, if ever, established through demonstrating descent from individual named forebears, as is common in many parts of the world; rather, it is established primarily through ritual hearth affiliation. This is not to say that individuals will not, on occasion, refer to named ancestors, especially recent ones, in order to buttress particular claims. For example, the *kepala adat* (*adat* head – a formal position established by the Indonesian government), made a point of noting, during several discussions with me, that both his father and his grandfather had held formal *adat* leadership posts within the community. However, claims relating to direct human ancestry are far less important in establishing formal patterns of precedence within the community than is ritual hearth affiliation.

Gerai people emphasise that every rice group should aspire to guardianship of its own ritual hearth. In taking a ritual hearth a group is said to 'stand', that is, it takes responsibility for itself in the ritual and legal domains. In particular, it assumes responsibility both for its members' protection under *adat*, and for the regulation of their behaviour to ensure that it meets the standards laid down by the *adat* code. The *bungking rumah* (the person or couple responsible for a principal dwelling and so with direct guardianship

of its ritual hearth) have a certain standing within the broader community, evidenced by the increased authority accorded to their voices on public occasions, including during community meetings, dispute-settlement proceedings, rituals, and so on (Helliwell 1995). Gerai people often stress that it 'doesn't feel right' (*teraso noa nyaman*) to belong to a rice group without its own ritual hearth, and so to depend on another group for protection of their dwellings and rice fields.

Significant, in this regard, is the fact that the direct human guardian or guardians of any particular hearth – that is, the *bungkung rumah* of the dwelling in which the hearth is housed – is referred to as the *bungkung* ('origin/essence/root'), not only of the ritual hearth itself, but also of all those rice groups and individuals affiliated to that hearth. When a Gerai person refers to another as his or her *bungkung*, he or she normally means that that person is the guardian of the ritual hearth to which he or she affiliates. This locution neatly sums up the character of the relationship between a ritual hearth guardian and anyone affiliating to his or her hearth: this is a relationship of ritual precedence within which responsibility and authority may be exercised.

The role of the *bungkung* extends far beyond simple representation of all those affiliating to his or her ritual hearth in ceremonies associated with that hearth. Rice groups that *numpang* to the hearths of others are also dependent on their *bungkung* in the broader ritual and legal realms. With respect to the *adat* code, with which the ritual hearth is so intimately connected, the *bungkung* assumes responsibility for all those affiliating to his or her ritual hearth, just as he or she is responsible for the maintenance of the protection that stems from it. At the simplest level this may involve the *bungkung* helping out to ensure that rituals are carried out correctly (through performing a central role in them or even contributing resources). More specifically, it is the *bungkung*'s responsibility to ensure that all those affiliating to his or her ritual hearth adhere to the narrower *adat* code regulating people's behaviour in Gerai. If a member of an affiliate group is misbehaving in any way (for example, neglecting a child or publicly committing adultery), the *bungkung* may legitimately interfere. In disputes that occur across rice group boundaries, the *bungkung* also takes responsibility for members of those rice groups attached to his or her ritual hearth. Before proceedings have reached a formal stage, it is the *bungkung* who most frequently acts as a mediator on behalf of the party affiliating to his or her hearth. If informal mediation fails, and the matter is aired at a formal public moot, the *bungkung* will normally play an active and highly visible part on behalf of the litigant affiliating to his or her ritual hearth. If this person

nevertheless incurs a fine as a result of such proceedings, the *bungkung* will ensure that it is paid, even to the extent of contributing to it.

Guardianship of a ritual hearth to which 'dependent' rice groups are attached, then, carries with it considerable responsibility with respect to those groups. But it also carries with it considerable authority. A member of a rice group without a ritual hearth of its own is not *required* to obtain the support of the *bungkung* in order to engage in dispute-settlement proceedings, and indeed, he or she may choose to disregard advice given by the *bungkung* on such occasions. But without the support of the *bungkung*, his or her position will lack strength. In addition, the *bungkung* may refuse to provide support or assistance in either informal or formal dispute-settlement contexts if he or she disapproves of the behaviour of any person affiliating to his or her ritual hearth. Such refusal automatically weakens that person's case in the eyes of the community, since in effect the *bungkung* is expressing the view that that person is in the wrong. In general, then, those who affiliate to the ritual hearth of another rice group are careful to seek the advice and support of their *bungkung* before embarking on any legal proceedings.

Non-compliance of an affiliate group with the advice of its *bungkung* on any matters pertaining to its behaviour (including in the ritual and legal domains) could easily lead to a breakdown in the ritual protection extended to the affiliate, with disastrous consequences for its well-being. Such a breakdown need not result from any deliberate withdrawal of protection by the *bungkung*; rather, it would most likely be seen as a consequence of the affiliate group's continued transgression of the *adat* code, a transgression that might not have occurred had it bowed to the greater knowledge of its *bungkung*.

The fact that a ritual hearth is 'broken' from another hearth, and may itself also be 'broken' in order to spawn new hearths, creates further contexts within which authority may be exercised. While a group is both ritually responsible for, and may exercise authority over, those groups that *num pang* to its ritual hearth, in the same way a rice group that has a hearth of its own is answerable to the group from which its own hearth was taken. The rice group with guardianship of the ritual hearth from which one's own hearth was broken is referred to as the *bungkung* ('origin/essence/root') of one's own group, just as a group without a ritual hearth refers to the guardian group of the hearth to which it affiliates as its *bungkung*. The role of the *bungkung* of the donor group with respect to those groups which broke their hearths from his or her hearth is much like that of the *bungkung* of a ritual hearth with respect to members of those rice groups which are 'dependent'

on that hearth. As the ultimate 'source' of a group's ritual hearth, he or she is able to exercise considerable authority over members of the 'derivative' group, in keeping with the hearth's regulative functions.

People must 'listen to' the voices of the *bungkung* of the hearth from which their own was derived because their ability to protect themselves and their rice, via *adat*, depends on it. Any group with its own ritual hearth that ignores the advice of the *bungkung* – the 'source' of that hearth – is certain to become ill-fated (*busong*) in the future, as marked by either incapacity to produce rice or serious ill-health of members. This is illustrated by a case discussed in detail elsewhere (Helliwell 2000), in which an elderly man entered a widow's house in the night and attempted to climb under her mosquito net. Since the man had guardianship of his own ritual hearth, it was the *bungkung* of the hearth from which his own had been broken who attempted to persuade him to take part in a moot to settle the case brought by the widow. The fact that the man's refusal to participate was in direct contravention of the wishes of his *bungkung* meant that other members of the community confidently predicted that he – and his rice group – would be afflicted by continued serious misfortune in the future. By rejecting his *bungkung*, the man was effectively rejecting the source of his own *adat* protection, and thereby rendering his group profoundly spiritually unbalanced. In addition, it was claimed at the time that the man would lack support in dispute-settlement proceedings in the future; implicit here was the statement that support from the *bungkung* would not be forthcoming on those occasions. And just as a member of a rice group lacking its own ritual hearth needs the support of the *bungkung* of the hearth with which it affiliates in order to be successful in such proceedings, so a member of a rice group with its own ritual hearth needs the support of the *bungkung* of the hearth from which his or her own hearth was 'broken' if his or her position is to have legitimacy on such occasions. Since such support would not be forthcoming for this man's group in the future, not only would the group suffer from ill fate, but in addition its members would have no legal redress and hence protection against misdemeanours perpetrated against them by others. As my informant put it at the time: "Now, anyone can do bad things to him. . . . Now he travels alone."

The practice of 'breaking' new ritual hearths from already existing ones, then, creates origin structures and corresponding relationships of precedence throughout the community, and establishes the contexts within which authority may be exercised. Indeed, through its location in a 'hearth descent line', every Gerai rice group and, following on from this, every Gerai

individual, is situated within a community-wide hierarchy (cf. Helliwell 1995).¹³ I use the term “hierarchy” advisedly here, since Gerai ritual hearths are clearly hierarchical in Dumontian terms (see Dumont 1966). There is a notion of the encompassment of younger hearths (and groups) by the older ones from which they were broken, and of ‘dependent’ groups (those without hearths of their own) by the *bungkung* group of the hearth to which they affiliate. Thus Gerai people speak of groups without their own hearths as enduring ‘within’ (*lem*) their *bungkung* groups. This encompassment is articulated most explicitly by Gerai people via the notion of *ha’* which can be roughly translated as ‘property’, ‘property rights’, or ‘belonging to’. The *bungkung* of a hearth on which other groups are ‘dependent’ will describe those groups as ‘belonging to’ (*ha’*) him or her: “*Iyo ha’ aku*” (“He/She belongs to me”) I was commonly told when questioning a *bungkung* as to why he or she was able to exercise authority over a group affiliating to his or her ritual hearth. The identical claim was often made with reference to the relationship between a group with its own ritual hearth and that group from which its hearth was broken. Indeed, a group is said to ‘belong’ in this way to any group higher up its hearth descent line. This encompassment is articulated in the authority which the *bungkung* of older hearths are able to exercise over those whose hearths are broken from their own.

Crucially, however, unlike the case in some other societies of what Errington terms the “Centrist Archipelago” of Indonesia, in Gerai there is no “single hegemonic encompassing centre” – there is no single ritual hearth from which all others originate, and whose owners rule and represent the community as a whole (Errington 1987: 435–436). Rather, Gerai people recognise several ‘original’ hearths (with even the exact number being contested) and, while the *bungkung* of those hearths have authority in certain contexts over those affiliated to hearths broken from their own, they are neither treated differently to any other members of the village in most day-to-day contexts, nor appear any wealthier. In other words, the status distinctions created by the stress on ancestral hearths are not marked in most everyday contexts; hence the ease with which this community might be classified as “egalitarian.”

Human Ancestors and Ancestor Hearths

Ancestorship, then, constitutes the basis on which individuals and groups in Gerai are incorporated into the system of *adat* and so made subject to

both the protection and regulation provided by that system. However, this is not ancestorship in the conventional sense, with its stress on the establishment of connections to particular named forebears; rather, the stress here is on establishing connections to a particular hearth and so to the “ancestors” of that hearth – the line of hearths from which it has descended or been broken – and so, ultimately, to the sky deities from whom *adat* was originally obtained. It is significant, in this regard, that of the handful of ‘original’ hearths in the community, only one had an origin tale, as already noted. While the guardians of the others were definite that their hearths consisted of original items handed on to a Gerai person by sky deities, none were able to name that original guardian or detail the kinship links back to him. In other words, the individual forebears whose hands the hearths had passed through were less important than the descent of the hearth itself. This suggests that the ritual hearth is used less as a way of connecting contemporary individuals with significant named ancestors, and more as a way of situating them within a descent line – a *hearth* descent line – that connects them with the origins of *adat* itself.

This does not mean, however, that ritual hearth affiliation may not also, on occasion, serve as a means whereby individuals may be connected with particular named ancestors. Gerai people speak of those groups and individuals who affiliate to the one hearth as being *sebungkung* (‘of one source’) and see a profound spiritual unity as operating between them (Helliwell 2001: 179–182). This helps to explain why in all cases of ritual hearth affiliation and the breaking of new hearths that I recorded in Gerai, the hearth affiliated to or broken from was held by guardians related by kinship to one of the heads of the group. Joint ritual hearth affiliation both demands and creates unity between affiliating groups; hence Gerai people prefer to share affiliation with those with whom they already feel some closeness via kinship. While this unity between groups affiliating to the one hearth is most often articulated with reference to groups and individuals in the present, it is clear that people also see hearth affiliation as connecting them to groups and individuals in the past. Several people told me that they had chosen to break their own hearth from a particular hearth on the basis that that hearth had once belonged to a loved or revered forebear: a mother, father, or grandparent. In a different case, discussed at length elsewhere (Helliwell 2001: 190–194), a man chose *not* to break his own hearth from that to which his group had affiliated up to that point, because he did not want to connect himself or his group to forebears who he felt had cheated his grandfather, and hence himself, of their rightful

inheritance. The hearth to which his group affiliated should, he believed, rightfully have descended to him rather than to its current guardians. As a consequence, he broke his own hearth from the same hearth from which the disputed hearth had earlier been broken. In this way he avoided connecting his own group to earlier human ancestors who he believed had cheated his ancestors and, not coincidentally, in the process negated the relationship of precedence that had existed between his group and the current guardians of the disputed hearth.

However, I would argue that connections that are established (and destroyed) with known human ancestors are a far less important component of ritual hearth affiliation than is one's location within a hearth descent line and consequent connection to a set of "ancestor" hearths. This can be demonstrated, via its exception, by referring again to the case discussed in the previous paragraph. This case was notable in that in tracing his hearth descent story the man was able to name his direct ancestors (on his mother's side) in the third and fourth generations up from himself; something that Gerai people are rarely able to do. This man was able to do so precisely because the fourth-generation couple were the original guardians of the hearth from which he broke his own hearth, while the third-generation couple were those who (wrongly in his view) had passed the disputed hearth to a descendant other than his grandfather. In other words, ancestral knowledge here is a product of hearth affiliation rather than something that is valued in its own right. Where human ancestors beyond two generations can be named, it is almost always because they were once guardians of hearths in the same hearth descent line as that to which the speaker's hearth belongs; these are often people to whom the speaker is only very indirectly linked by kinship.

In response to a request to recount his or her hearth descent line, a hearth guardian is much more likely to focus on ancestor hearths than on human ancestors. He or she does this through carefully identifying the dwellings – the longhouse apartments or houses – in which the hearth in question and its ancestor hearths have 'rested' and been cared for over the generations, often describing both the dwellings themselves and their locations in great detail. Similarly, a Gerai person is much more likely to specify the hearth from which his or her own hearth was broken by identifying the dwelling in which it is located than by naming its human guardians. "My hearth ash came from that apartment over there" is the most common locution used to describe the origins of one's own hearth. Again, what we have here is a stress on the hearth

itself, via its physical components as identified with a particular dwelling, rather than on the individual humans associated with that hearth.

In Gerai, then, ancestorship involves the stressing not of individual human, but of hearth, ancestry. Human ancestors beyond two or three generations are important to Gerai people only to the degree that they were once guardians of particular ritual hearths. Connection to ancestor hearths, on the other hand, is foundational to the well-being of every Gerai individual. Through establishing such connections, an individual is incorporated into an origin structure emanating from mythical contacts with sky deities, and so becomes subject to the system of *adat* that orders and regulates life in the community.

Notes

1 Gerai is a Dayak community of some 700 people located in the subdistrict (*kecamatan*) Simpang Hulu in the northern part of the district (*kabupaten*) Ketapang in the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Barat.

2 See Helliwell (2001: 141–196) for a detailed discussion of ritual hearths in Gerai.

3 See Fox and Sather (1996) for a collection of papers detailing such “origin structures” in a range of different societies.

4 The term “rice group” refers to the Gerai social unit whose members share both responsibility for the production of rice and rights over the product. It is the most important type of grouping found in the community. Most rice groups comprise a single residential unit; a small number comprise two residential units. While most ethnographers of Borneo would term the group a “household,” I find this label highly misleading on a number of counts, which I discuss at length elsewhere (Helliwell 2001). The term “rice group” seems to me to be much more in keeping with Gerai understandings of the character of the unit.

5 Photographs and swapped description indicate that the Gerai *jungkal* is identical to what the Paku Iban term *engkenyang* (Sather, personal communication). Jensen notes that other Iban call the plant *sengkenyang*, *jungkal*, or *sengkual* (Jensen 1974: 182–183). For botanical identification of *jungkal*, see Helliwell (2001: 160).

6 In 1986, the last year in which I took a formal count of all ritual hearths in the community, 55 of the 112 rice groups had ritual hearths of their own and 57 affiliated to the hearths of other groups. I have no reason to suppose that the proportion of groups with ritual hearths to those without has changed radically since.

7 Since, as noted earlier, there is no generalized preference for affiliation to either the husband's or the wife's natal hearth, it follows that there is also no generalized

preference for 'breaking' a hearth from the hearth of either the husband's or the wife's natal group.

8 The descent taboos are of varying importance. The breaking of some results only in the destruction or loss of possessions, but the breaking of others may result in death to specific members of the group. For example, if certain foods are eaten it is a child who may die; if others are eaten it is one of the *bungkung* who may die.

9 It is difficult to be precise about the number of 'original' hearths in Gerai since there is a lack of consensus among Gerai people as to whether several hearths are, in fact, 'original'. While most people agree that three hearths are of this type, two or three others are regularly described as both 'original' and 'non-original'.

10 Rondot is the child who has stayed on with her parents in the rice group which currently has guardianship of the ritual hearth in question. She thus stands to become its eventual guardian.

11 *Rungking* is a dark green leafy vegetable.

12 *Dimamang* is the name that Gerai people apply to the people who lived in the world before order had been imposed on it through the coming of *adat*.

13 This is ironic, since most anthropologists of Borneo would undoubtedly classify Gerai as an "egalitarian" as opposed to a "stratified" society. The societies of Borneo are conventionally divided by anthropologists into those that are "egalitarian" and those that are "stratified." See Helliwell (1994, 1995) for detailed discussions of this division and of the conceptual confusions that underlie any classification of Gerai as "egalitarian."

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